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SONS OF DIVES.

SONS OF DIVES.

A Nobel.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:

SAMUEL TINSLEY, 34, SOUTHAMPTON ST., STRAND.

1872.

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SONS OF DIVES.

CHAPTER XIV.

OUTWARD BOUND.

“My life is dreary,
He cometh not,” she said ;
She said, “I am a-weary, a-weary,
I would that I were dead.”

TENNYSON.

MANY weeks had passed since the events of the last chapter, bringing great changes to some of the characters who figure in this history. To follow out the course of their lives we must transport ourselves from the fair English scenes of a country gentleman's home in the pretty

neighbourhood of Windsor, to a shore of marvellous and picturesque glory, which, in contrast to the cold, calm beauties of western landscape, appears more like a vision than a reality—the embodiment of a summer's dream, rather than a mere earthly scene.

It must take time for a European traveller, on first arriving from the west, to realize that the sky of intense blue, the outlines of oriental beauty, the domes, the minarets, the castled rocks, the bays and shores, where palaces and cottages gleam white against the dark mountain background; the glittering water of the dancing channel, where, like restless birds on the wing, the numerous caïques dart swiftly to and fro—it must take time to realize that all this luxury of beauty, of legend, and of song, is not the mere creation of an excited brain, which will presently pass away like a scene on the stage, or, as an “*ignis fatuus*,” lead a benighted tra-

veller into bog and desolation, but that he is feeding his grateful eyes and senses on the actual glorious, satisfying beauty of the far-famed Bosphorus.

As the vessel cuts through the waters of the Sea of Marmora, and the expectant traveller strains his eager eye for his first glimpse of the Golden Horn, he sees the shining waters narrow, and the shores draw closer together, and there comes into view the crowded port of Constantinople, and that wondrously picturesque city, cresting the hill with a diadem of minarets, and mosques, and gilded kiosques.

Innumerable caïques, freighted with veiled women or men of many lands, skim the water, darting from shore to shore, for opposite to Seraglio Point looms the solemn, dark mass of foliage of the cemetery of Scutari, one of the largest and most picturesque in the world, where the graves of the Moslem extend

for upwards of three miles through gloomy intersecting paths, by turbaned-headed stones, in a cypress forest. But when the name of Scutari is mentioned it is no longer with this cypress-canopied home of the dead that our thoughts are associated, wild and poetical as are the traditions that add to its interest : such as the belief of the Turks that the flocks of small birds that fly backwards and forwards along the Bosphorus—backwards and forwards—never resting but when storms send them for refuge to the forests of the cemetery, where they perch and shriek,—are the damned souls of those who lie buried here.

Nor, is it with the gleaming houses, and painted kiosques, and luxuriant foliage that clothes the beautiful position of the town of Scutari down to the water's edge, that our thoughts now dwell ; nor, with the Maiden's Tower and its pretty legend of the Sultan's sweet young daughter, whose predestined

fate, that she should die by the death of a serpent, found her, in spite of the precaution of a doting monarch, who built the tower, in which he immured his only child, to preserve her life. Fate reached her in a basket of fresh figs in which an asp was concealed, and the maiden was found lying dead upon her couch, with the untasted fruit by her side, and the loathsome reptile sleeping in the fair young bosom it had marred.

It is no longer a romantic interest in legend or scenery, however beautiful it may be, that the name of Scutari awakens in our English hearts; our emotions and our memories are all absorbed by the sufferings of our brave countrymen, who found here an asylum in the hour of sorrow and death, and by admiration of the unwearying patient devotion of those gentle Englishwomen who ministered to them there.

It was in the last days of October, 1854,

that my readers must transport themselves in imagination to a regular quadrangular building, overlooking the beauties of nature and of art to which I have referred. There, in long rooms, filled with little beds placed at regular intervals, were stretched many a brave soldier, laid low, in the prime of his youth and manhood, by over-taxed strength in the trenches before Sebastopol, or wasting sickness contracted from want of food and warmth, or disabled by some too sure bullet of the enemy.

In these wards all was scrupulously clean and quiet, save for the restless tossing or occasional moan of the patients, and the flitting about of the ministering Sisters in performance of their charitable duties.

There is no need to mention the head and prime mover of this work of mercy.

The name of Florence Nightingale will live; but, while hers was the intellect and

strong nerve, and aptitude for organisation, that first prompted and so nobly carried out that great and humane undertaking, it must not be forgotten that there was, in the gentle women who followed and worked under her, the same self-sacrifice and unwearying devotion in the holy cause.

We all give our meed of praise and admiration in such cases. How can we help it? But still I think that none who have not actually witnessed or taken a part in the horrors of such scenes can fully appreciate what a delicately nurtured woman must have to endure in personal privation, in watching sickness, and agony, and death, in its most ghastly and repulsive aspects, when she devotes herself to such a labour of love as that of being a nurse in a military hospital in the time of war. Woe! to those thoughtless ones, who, from a sickly romantic sentiment, cast in their lot with the really inspired

workers, without having a vocation for the sacred office. They not only find their punishment in their own suffering helplessness, but they bring grievous and heavy burdens on those willing labourers, who are already taxed to the utmost of their strength and endurance.

On the day of which I write, in the last week of October, 1854, the Sisters were actively employed making preparation for fresh arrivals of human suffering, and secretly bracing themselves for fresh trials to nerve and patience.

They were a band of women of all ages and all grades—so plain and uniform in attire that the sign of a lady was to be distinguished only by expression of countenance, carriage, speech or motion. There was with most a look of concentrated attention to the business of the hour. Here and there might be seen a face lovely in feature, or the an-

gelic beauty of compassionate intention : for news of a murderous battle had reached the hospital.

Amongst the youngest of the nurses was a striking face and figure, once familiar to the reader, but so changed by dress, and still more by the seriousness of her occupation, and the sad experience of life compressed into the last few months, that she might well not be recognized at once. If Sibyl Blake was a lovely girl when Gerald Erne found himself irresistibly drawn again and again to be fascinated by her in her city home, she was a far more beautiful woman now. The closely braided hair only made more evident the classic shape of the small head ; the deep blue eyes had a steadier, stronger purpose in their gaze ; but the sweet mouth, once so tell-tale of the young girl's passing thought, shewed change more than all : sadness had found a home there ; the

soft tender lines were more resolutely set, and under the control of a stronger will. No peculiarity of dress could conceal the faultless outline of her figure as she gracefully moved about. Always well developed, it was now a form of a grander style than formerly, drawn up, as it were, in the conscious necessity of self-dependence; for it was a terrible truth, that this beautiful young creature stood alone in the world, and had no better home than the temporary one of a military hospital on a foreign shore.

The reader will remember that we left Miss Blake under the care of good Dr. and Mrs. Martin, but fully determined on carrying out her father's instructions to the letter, for joining him in Turkey. No arguments of her kind old friend were of any avail to make her relinquish her intention, nor even to postpone her departure beyond the time fixed, in the hope of getting a letter. Her

passage had been taken, and all needful arrangements made for her by her father: so there seemed to her no choice of action, and when the "Nancy Bell" was reported ready to sail, Sibyl took an affectionate farewell of Dr. and Mrs. Martin, who both went on board to see her and her maid and only companion, old Anne Carr, comfortably settled down in their cabin before starting.

The girl's spirits seemed to rise at the prospect of the voyage and change of scene. For her there were no cruel partings to go through—no tender regrets at leaving—no home-ties to yearn after. The future was all she had to live for. Hope and youthful spirits rose high at the prospect before her. Perhaps there was some secret spring of joy and hope, unacknowledged to herself, to cause a brighter and healthier glow to come to her pale cheek than had visited it of late. She was going to her father at all events. They

were to begin a new life together, in the sunny land of her dreams, now rendered too intensely interesting by the war that was raging so near it. Sibyl had always loved the army, too. Young as she was when the news of her brother's death reached her, she had dwelt on it much and often—on his manly goodness and gentleness to her, his little sister—on his troubles and his difficulties. The impetuous step in life that he had taken appeared to her young mind terrible, but grand; she loved to think that he had died a soldier's death, and she felt gently towards all soldiers for his sake. And then her lover, though lost to her now—how could she doubt it, remembering the cruel words of Morley she had overheard—remembering the vision of her rival Isabel, and Erne's long silence and neglect. Yes, lost to her, as far as happiness was concerned, but still secretly worshipped—was not he a soldier too?

Now it so happened that Dr. Martin was a friend and connexion of Miss Nightingale, and, as was natural, he had often talked to Sibyl of that wonderful woman, especially during the last few weeks, and had so excited her youthful enthusiasm and desire to see her, that before leaving England she asked for and obtained a letter of introduction to the heroine of the day. Armed with that precious treasure, and buoyed up with hope and vague anticipation, her cheek glowed and her eyes brightened as she stood on the deck of the vessel waving her handkerchief, her dark figure relieved by the red plaid flying in the summer's breeze, so that the kind doctor was rendered somewhat happier at the parting by thinking that he had not seen his pet look so like her sweet self since her mother's death.

A singular and disagreeable incident occurred just as the vessel sailed. Only a few

minutes before she weighed anchor, a boat was seen hurrying up to her sides, and put on board a pale, dark, closely-shaven man.—Morley, for it was he, rushed up to Sibyl, and with unusual excitement of manner tried most earnestly to persuade her, then, at the last moment, to give up her intended voyage; to trust in his good intentions, to believe in the wisdom of his advice, he entreated, becoming more and more excited, vowing at last that if she remained obstinate he would accompany her.

Sibyl almost thought him mad; but fully alive to the meanness and duplicity of his character since he had betrayed himself in the garden at Standish, and remembering the violence of his conduct to the young lady with him on that occasion, she now haughtily repulsed his advances and expressions of interest in her :

“ Sir ! what fresh duplicity and plot is

this? Are you mad? Do you suppose that *you* can induce me to break my father's orders. My father expects me, and, I am going to him."

Sibyl never forgot the grey, sickly look that came over the man's face at her words. He looked as if he would faint, but made an effort and recovered himself, and once more began vehemently to urge her to go back.

"You shall go to your friends, Sibyl; I swear that I will take you back to them, or where you will; only give up this wild scheme—you don't know what you are doing."

The girl was somewhat daunted by this unusual display of excitement and interest. It in no degree shook her resolve, but it disturbed her; it recurred to her often and often afterwards in looking back, and now before she had time to think, it disturbed her, and she would have liked to know what it meant. Before the possibility of Morley's hav-

ing some well-founded reason for this appeal had flashed upon her pure innocent mind, the bell rang for clearing the ship. The doctor and his wife had already left. The Captain came up just as Morley tried to seize Sibyl's hand to drag her away with him, and seeing the anger and disgust of the handsome young lady who was confided to his care, he made short work of it, insisting peremptorily on his leaving; in less than a minute Morley was forced over the side of the ship, down the steep ladder, where resistance was in vain, the anchor was heaved, the breeze filled the canvass, the vessel moved, and he appeared to Sibyl as a diminutive figure in a little boat that had brought him from the shore, now tossing about in the ruffled waters that the ship left in her wake.

It was only on that very morning that Morley, having traced Sibyl to Dr. Martin's house in the City, had called there to see

her, and had learnt from the servant that the whole party had just started for Gravesend, and the object of their journey. Seized with a good impulse, filled for once with good intentions, inasmuch as at the moment he thought *only* of the interests of Sibyl, he started off in her pursuit, and scarce took breath till he had gained the ship. Now, foiled in his endeavour—beaten by a mere child, as she seemed to him—scorned and repulsed by the girl he had always considered as his own, when he chose to claim her, and whom at the moment he was honestly trying to save—now, as he was left tossing on the disturbed water, and watched the “Nancy Bell,” with her flag flying, and her sails stiffening, calmly carrying far away this object of a solitary good impulse, the thought came to him that, “Yes, Captain Erne had also sailed for Turkey and the seat of war, and perhaps Sibyl’s firmness had been influenced

by the hope of meeting him.” His soul was once more filled with jealousy and malice, and as he gnashed his teeth with rage and vexation, his good angel, who had arisen and wafted him onwards with wings of encouragement to a righteous endeavour, now with folded pinions, sorrowing, left him . . . for ever.





CHAPTER XV.

HOPE DEFERRED.

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide sea.

COLERIDGE.

WE must now glance at the course of the “Nancy Bell,” through the many weary days and weeks that she took to make her voyage. It was not a prosperous one. She fell in with rough weather in the Bay of Biscay. An epidemic broke out on board, and several of the passengers, besides two of the crew, died. They were caught by one of those severe storms which are not uncommon on the beautiful blue waters of the treacherous Mediterranean, and were kept

idly waiting with sails hanging loose in a dead calm for many days afterwards.

Through all misfortunes and dangers, Sibyl's fortitude and courage rose triumphant, and was the admiration and comfort of all. From the first, when she escaped the common lot of sea-sickness, she seemed to breathe in health and strength with the breezes of the Atlantic, and when the air became heated and infected (and she never shrank from the closest contact with the sick), still she kept her health, and, in a great measure, her spirits. An almost mysterious influence seemed to overshadow and protect this young creature. As to Bob Kitson, the Captain of the "Nancy Bell," he simply worshipped her with the same sort of reverence that he paid to the stars and the moon, and this was shared very much by the crew, since one night, when hearing that a poor little sailor-boy was hopelessly bad with the fever,

she had asked to be shown where he lay, and had bathed and fanned his burning brow, and cheered the sad little heart with kind words. Those superstitious sailors, never having seen any woman like her before, believed that she was some spiritual being sent down to aid and protect them, and that while there was a smile to be called up on "*the* lady's" face, all would in the end be well with the "Nancy Bell." To those who saw Sibyl Blake during those times, the idea, though fanciful, was scarcely strange. It was her soft, but not unskilled hands that tended on the sick; her clear young voice that read aloud the holy words of promise, and spoke consolation to the dying. It was her brave heart that, when the passengers lost confidence in the raging storm, the Captain laid low with the epidemic, being unable to be at his post in the time of danger—it was her strong heart that remained undaunted, her encour-

agement that soothed the terrors of the women, and quieted the frightened children.

The poor old nurse, Anne Carr, who was supposed to be Sibyl's protector, too old to transplant from her long life of calm routine, soon broke down, and instead of being a help, was but an additional burthen and anxiety during the greater part of the voyage. She lingered on, however, till almost within sight, as it were, of their Canaan, and Sibyl hoped that, once on *terra firma* again she would yet rally ; but when within a very few days of their destination, she died, holding the hand of the child she had nursed from the cradle. Then when the young girl watched the last breath of her old nurse and friend—when she heard the splash that committed the worn familiar form to a watery grave, she broke down for the first time, with the feeling of desolation, and mourned for her in tears. But this depression did not

last long; calm and vigour soon returned; some strange energy of hope seemed to sustain her. In spite of the trials and weariness of the tedious voyage, her health was far stronger than it had ever been since her mother's death. There *are* some natures, and Sibyl's was one, that will never yield and fail while action for others is possible; it is the true spirit of ministration. Her spirits rose again, and now every feeling seemed intensified and merged in the hope and near prospect of meeting her father, her only relative, on whom her pent-up affections had lately concentrated. With all the ardour and generosity of youth, and a loving heart, she had dwelt on his tardy tenderness, and his self-accusations, till the dark shortcomings of past years seemed atoned and forgotten; in him was all her hope, all her future. She longed to be again with him, to cheer and comfort (she had found out her power with

him, and, true woman as she was, her chief happiness consisted in loving and comforting and receiving love in return), and she yearned to feel the protection of his paternal presence.

At last the long-looked for hour arrived.

The "Nancy Bell," after all her troubles, was opposite Constantinople, and a little tug steamer came and towed her into the busy crowded port. Immediately there was that wonderful confusion of sailors running here and there, of ropes hauled about, uncouth noises, passengers always in the way, as they gather their possessions together, while every minute was an hour to their expectant minds. How eagerly Sibyl scanned the faces that awaited the disembarkment of the passengers. More than once she fancied, for an instant, that in the back of a head, or the turn of a shoulder, she recognised the father she was to see so soon: "of course he would be some-

what altered." We always expect our friends to be altered when they have been away from us, and are surprised to see them appear exactly the same; but we should be so much more surprised if they were not.

Each disappointment only served to intensify Sibyl's longing and expectant happiness. She reminded herself that he probably would not know of the arrival of the vessel, and that she must seek him at the address he had given her, and which she knew by heart.

Mr. Blake had taken his own passage in a steamer, the "Fire Fly," but time being no object for his daughter, as he considered, he had in the old spirit of economy (for the ghost of greed was not to be laid all at once) chosen the more tedious and uncertain, but less expensive mode of a sailing vessel for the voyage of her and her nurse.

Captain Kitson, of the "Nancy Bell," had

from the first taken a great interest in the handsome young lady who had been put under his especial charge. He was a good, kind-hearted man, who had a daughter of his own just growing up, and had Miss Blake been the reverse of what she was, there is no doubt that he would faithfully and kindly have done his duty by her; but the events of the voyage, besides exciting his sympathy and respectful regard for the rare courage and excellence of this beautiful woman placed under his care, had imbued him with a reverence and veneration that amounted almost to the ludicrous, and would often bring a mischievous gleam into the smiling face that watched his uncouth but kindly efforts for her comfort, and in her honour. When she spoke to him, every feature and limb was strained into an attitude of eager, grateful attention. When he ventured to address her it was generally to ask some questions that

only an experienced seaman could be expected to answer, showing that he considered her to be possessed of supernatural knowledge, and her amused face and gentle laugh never disconcerted nor undeceived him. She had explained to him her hope of finding her father awaiting her, also the course she was to pursue if he did not appear on the landing stairs, and it was arranged with Captain Kitson that in the latter case she had better wait till he could leave the ship, and then as quickly as possible he would accompany her to the given address, and deliver her safely to her father. So now, at the first moment that the good-natured man could escape from the "Nancy Bell," they started off together, through the curious streets, some distance into the interior of the town, Sibyl elated, her eyes gleaming, her spirits like a child's exclaiming at the novel sights that met her view.

They soon reached the street they were seeking, and without difficulty found the firm of "Thompson and Losada," general merchants, trading with England and other parts of the world. Captain Kitson enquired for the English partner, but was informed by a flippant young clerk that Mr. Thompson was not in, and that he had better state his business, for Mr. Losada was particularly engaged. However, British determination was not so easily to be put off, and firmly insisting that his business was urgent and private with one of the principals, the young man condescended to show them into an inner office (where sat Mr. Losada), repaying himself for his civility by a rude stare at the young lady.

Their statement was soon made—that Mr. Blake, of Thames Terrace and Wheel Wharf, London, connected in business with the firm of Thompson and Losada, had pre-

ceded his daughter to Constantinople in the steam ship "Fire Fly," and had referred her to Messrs. Thompson and Losada for his address on her arrival, etc.

The slightest possible shade of surprise passed over the stolid eastern face of the merchant. "Had Miss Blake really understood her father to have left England? They had certainly received advices from him some two months ago about, stating that he was coming out in the 'Fire Fly,' but that vessel had arrived weeks ago, and they had made enquiries and found that Mr. Blake had not come out in her. He had taken his passage by her, but had never joined. They, Messrs. Thompson and Losada, had expected him by each mail after that, and one of the partners had even written to him in England, as there was a negotiation pending between them on which they desired a decision, but no answer had

been returned, nor any tidings of him been received."

By the time that this short matter-of-fact statement came to an end, a ghastly, terrible change had taken place in the radiant, hopeful young creature of a few moments before. Poor Sybil! The shock was too sudden—the blow too heavy. The courage that had not failed her in so many trials, that had been the support of others in danger and in death, was crushed at last by this too sudden fall from hope to despair and desolation.

The colour faded out of her face and left her ashy pale. The sweet eyes that so lately danced with expectant happiness were fixed in a stony glare of horror; her sight and strength failed her; she feebly, like a blind person groping, put out her hand towards Captain Kitson, and would undoubtedly have fallen, had not that weather-beaten sailor quickly caught the little hand in his rough

palms, and drawing her arm through his, without another word he led her gently away.

It was a pitiful sight to mark the ruin that a few short minutes had wrought. Even the flippant young clerk, who had passed his fingers through his curls with an air of satisfaction, and was waiting to have another stare at the beauty which had somewhat subdued even his self-importance, now looked shocked and concerned, and respectfully came forward to render assistance by finding a conveyance and helping Captain Kitson to put her in.

“Courage, dear young lady, courage; do not despair; we shall find him yet, and all will be well,” murmured the worthy man, but it was in vain; despair and terror had found a victim. The blow had struck home too surely. She was silent, trembling, and helpless.

The driver wanted to know where he was to take them: here was the first difficulty; it was no use asking Sybil; so after a moment's consideration, Captain Kitson said, "To the port." There was no help for it; *he* must be with his vessel; he must take her back there with him for the present. Their relative positions were completely changed. She was no longer the almost unearthly, angelic being that no storms could shake, no terrors appal, no sickness touch; she was now a lonely, broken woman—a deserted, unhappy child, thrown on his compassion and protection. It was with no little surprise that he realized this sudden transformation. This man of the sea did not know that woman's fortitude and heroism, astounding as it often is, will, if overstrained and played upon too long, suddenly collapse, leaving her weak and dependent as a child. Captain Kitson knew little of the intricacies

of the feminine nature, and probably could not have reasoned on it if he had. He knew and understood only what was plain before him. He hesitated not a moment, but with the determination of a good man, and the gentleness of a woman and *a sailor*, he applied himself to the charge of Sibyl's helplessness. She let him do what he liked, and asked no questions; and so, to the astonishment of the sailors, who shared their Captain's superstitious reverence for "the lady," believing but that for the luck she brought them the ship would have foundered—to their great surprise she came back, but so changed—so pitifully dependent and broken, that all the manliness and best qualities of their rough, simple natures were aroused by her need of compassion. They asked no questions. They treated her grief as too deep and sacred for sounding. They only vied with one another in showing respect and sub-

missive attention to their sovereign, who had unexpectedly remounted her throne and come back to reign over their hearts.

With the greatest despatch the best cabin was made ready for her use. The Captain's own little possessions went to ornament it; a sort of drawing-room was improvised on deck; everything that could be thought of by these poor men for the comfort of "the lady," was done, but Sibyl seemed almost unconscious of everything; the natural graciousness of her manner seemed arrested; even kindness failed to awake a response. She shed no tear, but remained stony, passive and silent. When she first began to recover sensation after the numbness of the blow, she would keep repeating to herself, "Alone, all alone—no one left, quite alone in the world, what have I done to deserve all this? It was hard, cruel."

Alas! poor haughty, loving, enduring,

hopeful, brave, clinging Sibyl,—for she was all this—had it come to that ?

Oh blame not my favourite too readily. If faith and patience failed her for a season, be lenient with her in her hour of trial. From the first moment she realized her misfortune, and believed fully that her father was lost to her for ever, that she was alone in a strange country—alone in the wide, strange world, and terror took possession of her soul—the natural terror and despair of utter loneliness and helplessness.

She remembered too that there was *one who might* have been her stay and comfort at this terrible time; she acknowledged to herself that his love would have filled her heart with a joy no trouble could have touched; no sorrow could have been counted as sorrow by his side; but he too had left her alone, and she hardened her heart against Gerald, against love.

Judge her gently ; her reason was clouded and too benumbed to analyze and argue possibilities with herself ; at this early stage of her grief she could only feel her “sense of loss.”

The storm had made wild work with Sibyl Blake. Still the young tree was not broken ; it was bent, bowed to the earth for a time, but the warm rays of God’s pitiful countenance would shine upon it, and the soft winds of His grace and mercy would fan it, and the young sapling would again rear its head erect, and its leaves put forth with fresh life, renewed and strengthened by the ordeal.

Two or three days passed thus, while the girl little knew the anxious watch that her friend kept over her. At night he laid like a watch-dog across the threshold of her cabin, with a loaded pistol by his side, and every sense on the alert for sound of distress or

sickness ; he was sorely grieved and puzzled ; all his friendly efforts to rouse her had failed. By day he would exert himself to talk and amuse her in his own simple way : he asked questions of her past life, of her friends, of everything he could think of in the hope to touch some chord of feeling to awaken her energies, but in vain ; she answered in little more than monosyllables. The good day came, however, when he chanced to refer to the strange scene that occurred when the ship was leaving Gravesend. He had never clearly understood the object of Morley's interference, as the subject had not been named since, but the instant he referred to that day he saw that it was a fortunate remark. Wonder, and then intelligence, flashed into Sibyl's face ; she was roused now. " Ah ! *now* she knew what Morley must have meant by his strange appeal. Morley must have known that her father was dead—better to

have told her the truth ; why such mystery ! ” The Captain’s end was gained ; Sibyl was awake again, and with instinctive delicacy he left her ; her mind was still confused, but it was working—she set about trying to think : “ What should she do ? where should she go ? She could not spend her life with these good sailors ; what a burden she must already have been to their patience and good nature. She hunted out her writing-case, her note book, her memoranda, and various addresses, when, out fell the forgotten letter of introduction to Miss Nightingale ! Here was hope—a refuge—work—life. Ah ! how could it have escaped her memory ! Her breath came fast ; the long pent-up sobs broke forth ; she fell on her knees by the hard horsehair sofa, and burying her face in her hands, wept such floods of tears as she had not shed since she knelt by the side of her mother’s death-bed.

In the shape of that letter came God’s

rays of mercy, and the strengthening breath of His grace.

As the soft summer rain softens and refreshes the earth after a scorching heat that threatens to destroy life and vegetation, so Sibyl's tears softened her own heart, and reopened the well of hope and life within her.

As soon as she could compose herself she called Captain Kitson, and told him of her discovery and thankfulness. Sibyl was her own sweet self again ; subdued, saddened, but her nature had reasserted itself.

Taking the Captain's great hand, she thanked him for all his kindness, all his patience and care of her.

The delight of seeing her so far restored, and of hearing her speak such words of gentle gratitude to him as she did then pour out, was too much for his warm heart, and hurriedly passing his sleeve across his eyes,

he rather abruptly begged to know what she would have him do now.

It was soon settled that no time should be lost, and that they should at once take a little boat and sail across to Scutari, to seek an interview with Miss Nightingale.

The plan was soon put into execution, and after the perusal of Dr. Martin's letter, and hearing the particulars of Miss Blake's story from herself and Captain Kitson separately, Miss Nightingale consented to Sibyl's urgent request that she would not only give her a refuge in the hospital while enquiries were set on foot to discover what had become of her father, but that she might be allowed to join the establishment as a nurse, and have a sphere of duty assigned her.

Thus it was that we find Sybil Blake moving about the wards among the sick and wounded, and enrolled in the band of working nurses.

In the meantime letters were written to Dr. Martin, Mr. Morley, and to Mr. Blake's bankers in London, to set enquiries on foot at once to find the missing gentleman.

Captain Kitson transferred all Miss Blake's possessions from the "Nancy Bell" to the hospital, and after an affectionate and respectful farewell, he sorrowfully, but thankfully, left his treasured charge in the good care of Miss Nightingale, and in the course of a week or so again set sail on his homeward-bound voyage.





CHAPTER XVI.

“THE VALLEY OF DEATH.”

“But what good came of it at last?”

Quoth little Peterkin.

“Why that I cannot tell,” said he ;

“But ’twas a famous victory.”

SOUTHEY.

IT was in the last days of October—tidings of a battle had reached the sisterhood at Scutari ; an engagement as unintended as it was unavailing—as murderous as it was heroic. The valley of Balaclava was strewn with hundreds of England’s brave sons. Already fatigued, fasting, faint, conscious, as they must have been, that “some one had blundered,” not a man of the gallant six

hundred flinched from a ready, almost joyful, obedience to the word of command.

“Their’s not to reason why,
Their’s but to do and die ;
Into the valley of death,
Rode the six hundred.”

The account of that day, so heart-stirring, though so painful, is not only too sad, but is also too much a matter of history, especially since Mr. Kinglake’s interesting volume, to be recounted in this story. We need only follow the fortunes of some of those characters in whom I hope that my readers are interested, and see how it fared with them.

Yes, the world knows only too well the particulars of that memorable charge ; how at the command : “Forward the Light Brigade !” hussars and lancers and dragoons moved down the slope in perfect order ; first at a gentle pace, then at a trot, increasing to

a gallop as they neared the guns that were pouring out death with every volley;—on they rode, unchecked by fire from the right, fire from the left, fire from the front; unchecked by the gaps that were made in their ranks; men and horses falling at every stride; on they rode steadily—on to the guns—crashing right through the guns—fighting beyond the guns—fighting for every step—back through those fatal guns again, at the word of command. Ah! how few rally. Scattered now here and there. Officers without troops—men without leaders. Back—through the storm of cross-firing; every man now for himself. At full gallop, with drawn sabre reeking with human blood, bareheaded and wounded, rides Duncan Meredith. That he had had a close hand-to-hand fight through the guns his condition betrays. He has had already one horse killed under him, but was lucky in catching and mounting another that

was riderless. Intent as he now is on regaining the English lines, his quick eye catches sight of young Cornet Domville on foot, trying to run, but well nigh exhausted. In an instant Meredith has reined up, dismounted, lifted the boy into the saddle, and with a "Ride straight for your life, sir," sent him at full gallop towards the English quarters. A few minutes later Harry was helped off his horse by friendly hands, and immediately fainted away.

When Meredith was thus left alone, in the middle of the valley, there was nothing left for it but to make use of his legs, and to look out for another horse. Fortune favoured him ; he caught at the bridle of a frightened animal rushing past him, mounted unscathed in the midst of shots—whizz—whizz—whish—h, sending the earth flying about him, and started again on his perilous ride. Whether he would have reached the English lines in

safety had he kept onwards, heaven only knows. He turned his head for an instant, and saw behind him Captain Erne fighting desperately with four Russians who had dashed down the bank to cut off his retreat, and now surrounded him. With Duncan to see was to act; he seemed utterly regardless of his own life, and although he was at that moment bleeding profusely, he dashed to the rescue—only just in time—for at that moment Erne, lifting his sword high in the air for a thrust at his assailants, received a blow from behind which completely disabled his arm. Meredith's skill in swordsmanship now came into play, and did good service. It was the work of but a few moments to run one Cossack through the body, and to unhorse another, while he called out to his officer to ride hard, and that he would follow. Erne, feeling himself helpless from the wound in his sword arm, did as he was

advised. Duncan still fought desperately with all his might, and all his skill; but strength was failing him, his uncovered head was the object of attack, he had received fresh wounds, he was getting giddy from loss of blood, no time was to be lost. So, with a great effort at steadiness, and a rapid and skilful manœuvre and action of the wrist, he gave an unexpected side-thrust which disabled his third assailant, then setting spurs to his horse he rode for his life. Too late, alas! The poor brute could not keep up the pace. The fourth Russian gained upon him, and before reining up fired a random shot after the already wounded soldier, which entered under the shoulder, passed right through the lungs, and lodged under the breast-bone. He was within sight then of the English quarters, but Duncan Meredith never reached them. He rolled heavily to the ground as a dead man, and

the tired horse trotted slowly and haltingly up the incline with an empty saddle.

Almost all the survivors after the charge of "the Light Brigade" at Balaclava were assembled there. Poor Meredith would have been one of the last of the stragglers had he succeeded in getting in.

It was a sad mustering when the roll was called over ; so few were there to answer to their names. Of the 27th the Colonel was missing ; the gallant Major, Swift, was there, having passed through wonderful hair-breadth escapes almost without a scratch. Oh ! giddy, coquettish Hetty, if he had fallen it would have been with your little red ribbon, and dead sprig of myrtle near his heart.

To him now fell the temporary command of the remnants of Her Majesty's Royal 27th Hussars.

Captain Crofts still lived to be the butt of a

fresh set of officers. Erne, Hetherington, Domville, and a few others less known to our readers, though equally to the world at large, answered to their names more or less firmly, according to their injuries.

Major Swift, a practical, experienced, and kind-hearted officer, who knew every man in the regiment, was sorely cut up at the loss of such gallant troops. He enquired anxiously for Meredith ; he had a real affection and admiration for him. They had been side by side on many a hard day, on many an Indian march, by many a death-bed ; he had felt instinctively that the man was in a false position, and without trying to intrude into his confidence, he had won the devotion of this soldier by treating him (as far as circumstances and discipline would permit) as one gentleman would another.

On enquiry how many had something to say of him—he had been seen everywhere :

Domville told how he had helped him ; Erne, how he had turned back to his rescue ; another had seen him fall—it was not far from the English lines.

There was moisture glittering in the Major's bloodshot eyes when he entreated the General for permission to have the dead and wounded that were within reach brought in without loss of time.





CHAPTER XVII.

THE WARD OF THE WOUNDED

Oh woman ! in our hours of ease,
Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,
And variable, as the shade
By the light quivering aspen made :
When pain and anguish wring the brow,
A ministering angel thou !

SCOTT.

SINCE the fatal news of the battles of Balaclava had reached the hospital at Scutari, the charge of the heavy dragoons in the morning, and of the Light Brigade later in the same day (although our brave heavies, fighting against mythical odds, had not suffered nearly in the same proportion as the light troops), the nurses had quickly made their preparations to receive the

wounded. Convalescents were removed to make way for fresh arrivals; the little beds looked white and clean; the women waited with anxious faces; the surgeons were ready for their ghastly work: at last a steamer was signalled freighted with its breathing mass of human suffering. Swiftly, noiselessly, tenderly, one by one, the burdens were brought in.

It was well that humanity filled the breasts, and habit strengthened the nerves, of those who had to face that harrowing, pitiful sight.

For a time all was activity, the doctors taking the lead, the nurses rendering assistance where it came within their province. The pale cheeks of the young nurse Sibyl Blake turned paler yet, but the weakness and the moans of those brave sufferers soon brought self-control to her aid, and firm resolve to do her part in the work of mercy; but, suddenly the girl's eyes dilated with

horror as they rested on the inanimate form of an officer who was being carried in from the operating room, and laid upon his bed. For a few moments only she stood with bated breath, and white lips apart. Could it be? That familiar form, once so scrupulously arrayed in the fashion of the day; that used to seem to her girlish imagination as a god in it's beauty—now so marred! The head, once so confidently carried, now hanging back listlessly; the long golden moustache, once the admiration of many a fair partner, damp and tarnished, sharing in the general distress of his appearance; the bandages stained with bright red, telling too plainly their sad tale. Could it be? Was this the prosperous, the courted, and the courtly Captain Erne! her lover! her heart's idol! Was it thus she was to meet him! Dead! Oh God, not dead! In the flash of an instant all jealousy, and anger, and reproach were blotted out;

he was hers now—hers in his weakness, in suffering, if not in death.

It was Sibyl who helped to lay the insensible body gently down, and who arranged the pillow in the easiest way. It was Sibyl who bathed Gerald Erne's dewy temples and chafed his death-like hands, and desisted not in her eager efforts till the chest heaved again with returning life, and the dim eyes opened slightly. He had fainted from exhaustion, and from the pain of having a severe sabre cut on his arm dressed, and a ball taken out of his foot; but although his hurts were painful, the surgeons at once pronounced them not necessarily dangerous.

Perhaps it was well for Sibyl that, just as Gerald was returning to consciousness, one of the senior nurses reminded her that this was not her appointed place, that patients were rapidly being carried in to the adjoining

ward, where her help was much needed, and where was her allotted task.

Yes, perhaps, it was well for her, for where is the woman who, when the man she loves lies helpless and suffering before her, will not forget her pride, her injuries, her self-consciousness, and lavish all the pent-up tenderness of her heart upon its idol; for once their positions are reversed; she feels no shame then at laying bare her heart's secret; she glories only in the wealth of love at her command, and pours out its riches without stint, while the object of it is almost overwhelmed with wonder at the strength of the passion he has roused.

We say, therefore, that believing herself to have been neglected for a rival, it was well that Sibyl was spared this strain upon her feelings.

She was soon busily engaged with other patients, and bewildered and full as her

heart was with anxiety, thankfulness, wonder, her hands found so much sad work to do that her sympathies were quickly enlisted, and she scarcely found time for thought of anything but the work before her.

Among the patients under Sibyl's care were two, well known to the reader. Our poor young friend, Harry Domville, who had come out from the dépôt to join his regiment only a short month ago, had quickly had his experience of real service. The brave boy had borne himself as becomes a soldier's son, but he was much changed in the short time; in the list of casualties after the charge at Balaclava he was reported as "slightly wounded," but not being naturally strong his system had received too severe a shock, and was greatly exhausted.

On another bed lay a wan, unconscious figure that it was difficult to recognize as the manly, upright soldier, the knightly form of

Duncan Meredith, as we remember him riding through Standish Park so few months before for his interview with Miss Vernon.

This case was reported "very dangerously wounded;" indeed the doctors had no expectation that he could survive, but already great interest was felt in the case, partly from its extremity, partly from the professional admiration of the operators for the physical perfection of the inanimate form under their hands, and partly also from the rumour accounting for his desperate state, by the fact of his having saved several lives by exposing his own; it would certainly be a V.C. case, they thought, and it would be a pity that he should not live to have his reward;" but there seemed small chance of it: a bullet had passed through the back, piercing the lungs, in itself a most dangerous wound, and he was so severely cut about the head (showing hand-to-hand fight against

overwhelming numbers, for he was a skilled as well as a fearless swordsman) that the wonder was he still breathed.

This was one of Sibyl's charges, and an absorbing one. Soon heart and brain were intent on saving this life; through the long hours of the night she watched to see returning consciousness, or natural sleep take the place of stupor, and as she frequently moistened the parched lips and looked into the pallid face, she as often offered up a prayer for the life of the sufferer. It was long before it seemed to be answered.

A sort of awakening was accompanied with high fever, but not intelligence, and during those terrible days, when the body was too weak, and the breathing too painful, from the chest wound, for articulate speech, the young nurse would listen in vain to the whispered mutterings in the hope of gleaning his wants, or finding returning consciousness; but, at

last, when Sibyl was almost worn out with fatigue and disappointment, the day came that rewarded her humane patience. A long, still sleep,—so still, that again and again it seemed like death ; but it was not death—yet—and when the poor patient opened his great hollow eyes there was consciousness in them, and he looked gratefully at his nurse ; he was too weak to speak. Communication between them consisted chiefly of looks of encouragement on one side, and of gratitude on the other. And now, though consciousness had returned, anxiety was not over ; the strength and life of the invalid seemed to be ebbing away ; Sibyl could scarcely be induced to leave the bedside, so much depended on incessant watching and constant administering of nourishment, and such success attended her care that the surgeons were soon surprised at the improvement of the patient. Sibyl was by this time intensely interested in this

life that seemed as it were given into her hands, and it became so absorbing as most beneficially to prevent her mind from dwelling over much on her own heart anxieties, though her love was not for a moment *forgotten*, and she kept constant unseen watch at a distance over that other life, dearer to her far than her own ; so she knew that Captain Erne was progressing well, and that there was no cause for anxiety.

Several times, just to ease her aching, yearning heart by a sight of Gerald, she had, at night, or quite in the dark, when she felt no fear of being recognized, made pretext for moving about the ward where he lay, and had seen him sleeping and waking. She always went away before she thought there was a chance of his seeing her ; but more than once poor Gerald thought that either his mind must be wandering or that he had been asleep and dreaming, and

he would puzzle his attendant by declaring that he had been sleeping and had had a dream, when she had watched him awake all the time.

The dream was always the same—that he had seen Sibyl—his own Sibyl—the one woman in the world to him,—gliding about the sick ward, dressed as a nurse ; but, as in all dreams, she was not tangible, for she never came near him—never spoke—only looked gravely, sadly, even reproachfully at him from a distance, and disappeared just as he determined to call her. It was always the same—always just the same—but it was very natural, he thought, and very sweet and comforting, but for that look of reproach, and sometimes that frightened him and he became quite nervous.

“ Had anything happened to his darling ! was it her ghost ; it looked pale and sad enough. Oh if it *would* but come nearer ! ”

But Sibyl never went nearer. During her long silent nights of watching, she had again realized her forsaken position ; she had again recalled the garden at Standish ; the words she had heard as she stood by the yew hedge ; Isabel's seeming acquiescence in them—the fair-haired beauty, ah ! her fatal beauty, as poor Sibyl thought it, and the corroborating fact, as she mistakenly believed, that Captain Erne had taken no trouble to see her again, though he knew her to be in sorrow, and so, though her heart ached, aye, nigh unto breaking, she encouraged and strengthened herself to act with becoming womanly pride and reticence. Perhaps the struggle she was enduring caused her to throw more feverish ardour into the task she had undertaken ; she strove to banish thought of self in hard work and sympathy with others' troubles, and became a wonder to the elder Sisters that one so

young and inexperienced could be so unwearying and enduring:

Poor Harry, who continued in a state of extreme debility, became very fond of Sibyl, and liked her to wait on him better than any of the good women. His wound was getting well, but he was daily getting weaker; a wearing intermittent fever left him more and more exhausted after each relapse. The poor boy's nerves had had too severe a strain on them; the only chance for him would have been to have been suddenly transported back to England, to home, to Hetty, and—and—perhaps to Isabel Vernon. I believe that in his weak, excitable, nervous condition, her cool steady hand would have done much to calm the fever of his brow; but it was too late; he was too far gone to bear the voyage; it could not be thought of; he alternated between the excitement of fever and the listlessness of reaction, which

became greater and greater, and the doctors saw that the end was near. It was sad to die so young. The chaplain visited him, but poor Harry never made much response to his good intentions,—not in words at least ; he would open his heart much more fully to Sibyl. She seemed to understand him, and when it was evident that the end was near, she hesitated not to speak openly to him of the past life that was fading from him, and of the everlasting life of unutterable bliss so near, could he but grasp the outstretched hand of his Saviour and with true repentance trust his sins and his weakness to His atoning mercy, and holding Sibyl's hand in his, as it were for comfort and assistance, the poor boy prayed, and sought acceptance ; who will doubt that he found it ? Soon after this the last day came for him ; he had received the Holy Sacrament of our Church for the first time in his life in the morning,

and had lain very quiet all day. It was towards evening that he faintly called Sibyl, and she saw that a great change had come over him; he asked how Duncan Meredith was—he had been very fond of telling her how generously this man had sacrificed himself for his “officer” (Harry was still proud of feeling himself a cavalry officer)—and then faintly added, “I shall go first, nurse; I think I am going to-night—where are you nurse?—hold my hand, please—I can’t see well—it is *so* dark—why did you put out the lights—dear nurse, pray for me—and you’ll give my last love—to—to—my mother—and Hetty—I’ve told you about Hetty—and—there’s some one else—don’t forget nurse—give my dying love to—Isabel Vernon—and say, I want her to take the—the bloodhound pup”—a long silence—the breathing became fainter—slower—he still held Sibyl’s hand—presently, he opened his

eyes wide with a start, “Nurse, nurse, where are you?—it is light”—another silence—she bent down her ear and heard the words, “Dear Lord, forgive,” and then Harry Domville’s short life had ceased.





CHAPTER XVIII.

RECOGNITION.

Affliction's sons are brothers in distress ;
A brother to relieve, how exquisite the bliss.

BURNS.

ANOTHER week had passed, bringing almost daily changes in the Hospital. Poor Harry's bed was waiting for another occupant ; others like his had been emptied by death ; some patients had been removed to a convalescent ward to leave room for fresh cases, for another bloody battle had been fought on the plains of Inkermann.

Sibyl occasionally received letters from England, where enquiries had been set on foot through Dr. Martin and Captain Kitson

in the hope of discovering the fate of her father, but with no result up to this time—not the slightest clue had been found. This was an additional weight on her mind and spirits, and had it not been for her growing interest in, and the unwearied devotion to, the serious case of Duncan Meredith, she probably would have succumbed to the continued strain upon her nerve and strength. Her favourite patient had for a time made fair improvement, so as almost to be pronounced out of immediate danger, but for the last few days again he had stood still; a depression was creeping over him, which, with his extreme bodily weakness, was a most unfavourable symptom. The doctors urged the necessity of rousing him. “If that listlessness of mind continued,” they told Sibyl, it would be fatal, it would take away “all chance, for body and mind would sink together; she must try to rouse him; talk to

him, and try to interest him in something; his very life depended on her success." And so one November afternoon the young nurse set to work, with true kindly endeavour and feminine tact, to rouse the sick man.

To the questions she asked about the Balaclava charge, the camp life, and military affairs in general, he responded but little. Then she travelled to England, hoping there to touch a chord. What part did he know best?—and then, in despair of interesting him, she gradually laid open the troubles of her own life, and told him of her lonely position—of how she came to be there nursing him—of her mother's death—of her father's plans—her difficult voyage, and the crushing disappointment that met her at Constantinople.

She was rewarded for thus unselfishly laying bare her own sorrows, in a good intention, by seeing the invalid's eyes light up

with life and interest, as he with difficulty raised himself on one arm, watching intently the beautiful compassionate face while she spoke. She answered unreservedly the questions he put to her. The man's heart and tongue were unlocked by the growing sympathy between them. What more natural that in return for her friendly confidence, and yielding to her gentle persuasion, he should unfold the long suppressed story of his life.

“Had he no relations—no dear ones, who would like to hear of him?” she said. “She would write for him or take any trouble he wished?”

“If I should die, yes; if I am likely to live, no. My life has been a sad failure,” he answered wearily. “It is a long story; I am not exactly what you must suppose me to be.” And then he told her the history of his youth, his education, his happy Eton days, of his mother, and her unhappy life;

how it galled him, and roused his indignation against his father for his neglect of her; how unfitted he himself was by nature and by education for the position assigned him in his father's business; and how one day, in anger at the coarse cruel words used to him, he had hastily enlisted in the 27th Hussars. That the regiment was just sailing for India. Not long after its arrival there cholera had broken out amongst the men: amongst those who were carried off by it was one David Black, who in the list of deaths returned was put down as *D. Blake*, and when it came to his knowledge that it was supposed by his family to be himself (for they did not know that he had suppressed his surname and enlisted as Duncan Meredith), the idea had struck him, that, his father having cast him off for ever, and his mother having already suffered the shock and grief of believing him to be dead, he

would let her remain under that impression until he could do something to distinguish himself—something that would make her proud of the son who should be restored to her; for he had soon repented of the hasty step he had taken, and felt degraded by the position in which he found himself, and by association with his comrades; and so time had gone on, slowly and heavily enough to him—for nothing happened to give him a chance of rising, or of distinguishing himself from the rest of the men—but the resolve of being a dead man, forgotten, grew upon him. So now, when after years of foreign service the regiment returned to England, he had taken no steps to make himself known to his family. On looking back now he thought he had been wrong; it was a morbid and unnatural idea. Habit had enabled him to keep up this solitary uninteresting life of endurance for so many years, but, there had been passages

in his life lately (here the pale face flushed) which had made it more bitter and intolerable than ever; no *Lady* could look upon him differently than she would look upon the servant who stood behind her chair—he realized his degradation to the lowest depths, and that was why he cared so little to live. When the 27th was ordered for the Crimea he had gone to the City (it was in the black City that his lady mother had pined away her life), just to learn if all was well with her; but he had waited too long, the house was shut up, and a crusty old woman, who seemed to be in charge, knew nothing: on questioning her she answered, “I’ll tell yer once for all its no use you soldiering fellows coming here; I don’t know nothink about the fam’ly; I did hear as a lady died here not long ago, but who she was, nor where the rest of the fam’ly’s gone I don’t know no more than the Lord Mayor.”

So he had concluded that his long-suffering mother had been taken to her rest, and there was nothing left for him but duty and death.

“I am glad I was in the charge,” he added, “and specially glad that I saved Captain Erne’s life.”

All through the time he had been speaking his eyes had not rested on his nurse, or only momentarily, and before he ceased, quite tired with the effort of talking, he had unconsciously closed them, or he could not have failed to see the effect he had produced. How as he proceeded with his story Sibyl’s eyes dilated with wonder and excitement; her delicate nostrils quivered with suppressed emotion; her parted lips looked as if breath was suspended.

When he ceased speaking she said in a low agitated voice, with a great effort at self-control, “You speak much of your mother, had you no sister?”

“ Oh, yes—dear loving little Sibyl. She is one of the pricks of my conscience—she was quite a child when I committed that hasty folly, but Sibyl must be a woman now, and if our mother is gone, what can have become of her? ”

Quite wearied now with so much talking, he turned away his head, with eyes still closed in thought ; but in a few moments he was aroused by his nurse slipping down on her knees beside the bed and laying her arm gently and caressingly across the broad chest, while she murmured, “ Oh Duncan, Duncan, look at me—Sibyl is here. Do you not know me?—live for me, Duncan—oh live for me ! ”

The sick man started—the little head was nestling against his arm—he raised it up ; he took the fair young face between his wasted hands and looked long and earnestly into the loving eyes, at last he murmured,

“My little sister—my poor little one—thank God—”

With her brother's arm thrown round her, and her face buried on his shoulder, Sibyl's long self-contained strength broke down, and she wept quiet, grateful, heart-easing tears, in the faint glow of a November sun sinking low in the heavens. The ward was unusually empty and quiet; time passed on, and these two full hearts were unconscious of everything but their own new-found happiness.

The sun went down, and darkness found the brother and sister sleeping for very weariness of emotion; the two faces so strikingly alike resting close together.





CHAPTER XIX.

PROMOTION.

The glory dies not, and the grief is past.

SIR S. E. BRYDGES.

WHEN the doctors made their rounds next day they were not a little surprised at the sudden improvement in their patient ; he gained strength every hour, there was a light and vigour in the eye quite new to him ; the pulse had a firmer beat, and life seemed to have taken out a new lease. The magic touch had been given.

The secret of this rapid improvement was soon made known to the doctor, for the story was told by Sibyl to her sister nurses, who all sympathized in the happiness of the

brother and sister, and now all wondered that the extraordinary likeness between them had not struck them before. The fact was that until joy had brought back animation to poor Duncan's sad face, the resemblance had been as it were veiled.

One day, soon after this time, when Sibyl happened to be off duty in the ward, and was taking that amount of rest which was absolutely necessary, Captain Erne, who could now manage to walk with the aid of a stick, came for the first time to look after his wounded trooper, whom he had not seen since they separated in the Long Valley. Erne knew that he owed his life to this man, very nearly to the sacrifice of his own, if not quite. He had heard of his unhesitating exposure of his own safety to ensure that of poor Harry and others. How, where all had been brave, this man had been braver, and he remembered words of Isabel Vernon's.

So now he came to his bedside, full of kind, generous feelings, happy that it had fallen to his lot to be the bearer of good news. He was shocked at the ruin he saw there ; it gave a softer and tenderer tone to his voice and manner, as the thought passed through his mind that earthly honour and reward had come too late for this good soldier.

He took the wounded man's hand, and spoke to him as a man speaks to his friend and equal ; he told him that he owed him a debt that he probably never could repay, at which the other pooh-poohed, and tried to change the subject ; and then they inquired of each others' hurts, and progress, etc., and Erne detailed the last news from the seat of war : some particulars of Inkermann, the state of the siege, etc., and at last when he thought his hearer was sufficiently prepared, he came to the main object of his visit, saying : " Now, Meredith, I have been telling

you sad things enough, can you bear to hear good news? ”

“I have heard none for many a day, till lately,” he answered, “but I think I can bear anything now.” Without heeding or understanding what he meant, Erne proceeded: “I am happy to tell you that your services have been recognized at the Horse Guards, your name was mentioned through Swift, now our Colonel, and they have given you a commission in our own regiment. I congratulate you, Meredith, with all my heart, and so will all who are left of us.”

The sick man flushed up with excitement, and his breath came quick, but he did not speak, so after a pause of a few moments, Erne added, “And that is not all; you know what havoc has been made of the regiment, there is but little of it left; there are very few of us—officers or men, so from that promotion has been very rapid. I have my

Majority. Your commission is dated from the 25th October, the day of the charge—the day the Light Brigade was slaughtered, poor fellows ! I have the last list—here it is ; your name appears at the bottom of the Captains ; you have got your troop without purchase. Captain Meredith, welcome amongst us, you have warm friends among those who are left, I assure you.”

It was a kind and well-intended speech. Gerald had thought over how he should break the information, and I do not think he could have done it better, but it was almost too much for the invalid’s strength ; his breathing, at all times difficult, became very painful. The flush died away and he turned ghastly white. Again the thought occurred to Erne that it had come too late, but after a few moments Duncan became calm and spoke. “ Thank you—thank you heartily, Major. It is sudden—almost too much—

and, I fear, almost too late ; but I thank you for your kindness. It is time now that I should be open with you. I am no longer ashamed of bearing my own name. I am then Captain Blake—not Meredith ; my real name is Duncan Meredith Blake. I am a gentleman by birth and by education. After I left Eton, my father insisted on putting me to a course of life I could not endure ; we quarrelled, and in a hasty fit of indignation I enlisted, in the name of Meredith. We went to India ; hearing that through a mistake of names in a list of casualties my family thought I was dead, I determined to keep my existence secret, for I was bitterly ashamed of my position, and writhed under a continual sense of degradation. You know the rest. You know whether I did my duty. I had brought my misery on myself,—but it was hard to bear.”

The words came more and more slowly.

He had miscalculated his strength in supposing he could bear anything; he became very faint, and Major Erne, seeing that he was exhausted, said, "There, my dear fellow, don't talk any more; you have had enough excitement for one day," and beckoning to a nurse, left him in her charge; but as he limped away he said to himself, "they were right, he *is* a gentleman—and a rare good one too; what an idiot I must have been not to find it out. Blake! He said his name was Blake! I wonder whether—pooh! what a fool I am, as if there were not plenty of Blakes in the world; it is time I went back to camp."

Of course this interview was told to Sibyl as soon as she returned to Duncan's side. She was greatly excited about it, as was natural on hearing of her brother's rapid and honourable promotion. His account was as curt and bare as men's reports of conversations generally are to their women-

kind—having to be pumped out of them; but by degrees, at Sibyl's request, and in answer to her minute interrogatories, he told her as well as he was able what had passed between him and his Major.

“And did he make no observation when you said your name was Blake? did he say anything? how did he look?”

“No, he certainly did not say anything. I don't know that he looked anything. Why, you foolish little sister, you expect everyone to care as much as yourself at this sensational denouement.”

Sibyl blushed, and said no more, but she thought a good deal. Everything seemed to confirm the impression that she was forgotten and her image replaced by another. “My name even did not move him, nor lead him to ask after me,” and with a strength of purpose prompted by pique, jealousy, and pride, she determined that not only should

he have no chance of seeing her during the remainder of their stay in the hospital, but that she would not look upon him again. To this resolution she kept, with less difficulty than might have been expected, for when in the ward she always kept a sharp look out, that she might make her escape should he appear. But as it so happened that Major Erne made his visits to Duncan Blake at the same hour of the day her firmness was never put to the test, for it was just the time when her turn came to seek fresh air or repose for health's sake, and Duncan, with the jealous reserve so usual with brothers about their sisters where there is a man in the case, never mentioned her in any way, and never having recurred again to his own private history since his first conversation with his Major, Erne had delicately avoided the subject as one that was probably painful to him.

Thus it came to pass that days succeeded

to days, and Gerald never knew that the woman he loved best in all the world, the woman for whom he was now willing to give up everything but honour, was living under the same roof with him, and chafing under his fancied neglect.

So it is that if when we can we refuse to grasp the good that lies by our hand, it may never again be within our reach.

Every day brought fresh life and strength to Duncan, although he was likely to require extreme care for many a week and month; and there was not the slightest chance of his being able to rejoin his regiment during this campaign. So the doctor now strongly advised that he should return to England on unlimited sick leave. Miss Nightingale wisely decreed that Sibyl's first duty was to take care of her brother, and she being nothing loth, her career as an hospital nurse drew to a close.

The day for their departure came. When Major Erne heard that his new brother officer was about to leave, he gave him several letters of introduction in England that he thought would be useful to him in making the right sort of acquaintances, for he felt wonderfully drawn towards him; and after what he had seen of him, he felt no hesitation at acknowledging as his friend this man raised from the ranks. Among the letters was one to Lady Standish, and another to Mrs. Vernon, but of course without mention of Sibyl, as he knew nothing about her.

The brother and sister had actually started for the steamer, which was hissing away in the port as if impatient to carry them back to England, when Major Erne was holding a conversation with Miss Nightingale on the subject of Duncan's health, in which he had become much interested, ask-

ing if she thought he would in time really recover his former strength, when he heard for the first time of Sibyl's having been so long near him.

“I do think now that with care and time he may get over it,” said Miss Nightingale. “For a long time I did not think there was a chance for him; but ever since that blessed meeting between the brother and sister, hope and happiness seem to have worked a miracle. What a romantic story it is—how lovely she is! and as good as she is beautiful. That girl has the heart and courage of a real heroine.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Major Erne. “What meeting? What girl?” and he turned pale, as an instinct suddenly flashed the truth upon him.

“Don't you know?” Miss Nightingale replied. “Surely you heard of it! You who saw the man so often of late—don't

you know the lovely girl who took refuge with me two or three months ago, and became a nurse here? Sibyl Blake her name is; did you not hear that in this Duncan Meredith, as he called himself, she found a brother whom she had long supposed to be dead? I feel as thankful as if she belonged to me, for——”

Gerald heard no more. To the astonishment of his companion he rushed away as fast as his lameness would allow; he waited not for hat or aught else; he found a vehicle, and promising the driver almost any sum he liked, drove furiously through the narrow streets down to the port.

Some time was lost in finding out which was the right steamer; it was found at last—at last, but too late to go on board. Some men seem fated to be always just too late. Poor Gerald, doomed again to see his love, but as a phantom passing away in silence

from him. There was Sibyl on deck, standing by her brother's side, with her hand on his shoulder, as he, tired with the exertion of moving, leant back in the chair she had arranged for him. Yes, Gerald had no difficulty in recognising her now. It was Sibyl sure enough; no longer as an hospital nurse, as he fancied he had dreamt of her, but looking so like her stately self in her black mourning gown and the red tartan cloak.

What would the Honorable Major Erne's friends, lounging in the club windows of St. James' Street and Pall Mall, have thought if they could have seen him now at the edge of the quay making frantic gestures to attract the attention of a young lady on board the steamer. They were so near each other—so close at last, and yet so irrevocably divided. For one moment, actually stretching out his arms, he called her by her name.

The girl's pulse leaped—heart, ear, and brain were on the stretch, like a keen sportsman who hears from afar the slight rustle among the branches, and knows that after his long, patient watch the object of his desire is near; so, amid the din, and turmoil, and bustle of the vessel's last moments in port, her whole being heard and felt the accents of love and supplication. There was no mistaking it—no resisting it; in the impulse of the moment she knew not what she did; a scared wild look came into her eyes; for one instant Gerald thought he could distinguish her lips moving—he almost fancied that she held her arms out towards him—but her cloak fluttered round her, and it was impossible to tell, and at that moment the steam was let off, the vessel laboured forward, and it all seemed again more like a dream than reality.

Sibyl asked herself what it meant—it was all confusion to her; her reasoning was at fault; she could not understand it; but I think she was happier than before.

Duncan had not perceived Erne till at the last instant a movement on Sibyl's part attracted his attention, and, without seeing what had passed, he seemed to gather that she recognised his Major, and he asked her at once, "Sibyl, do you know Major Erne? I suppose you saw him in hospital?"

"Yes, I knew him before; he used to come to Thames Terrace. I suppose—I think he had business with our father. He often came, and our mother was always pleased."

A huskiness in her voice made the brother look up. She was blushing deeply; he did not like it. Had this man, whom he believed (ah, too bitterly believed) to be attached, if not engaged, to Miss Vernon,

had he been trifling with his little sister? His wrath rose at the thought. All was confusion. In the meantime the steamer steadily ploughed its way on to the waters of the Mediterranean; on, without event or mishap, back into an English port.

Major Erne, crest-fallen and sorrowing, made his way back. The hospital seemed intolerable to him now; he blamed himself bitterly, he scarce knew why. Then it had actually been Sibyl in the body and not her ghost that he had seen cautiously moving about the ward during his worst times; so he found on further conversation with Miss Nightingale, and now it was almost a pleasure to be angry with her for avoiding him. "Was it a woman's coquetry?" He dismissed the unworthy thought before it was well formed. "Had she ceased to care for him? It was true she had never said she loved him: he had never asked her. Ah!

there was the sting; but he thought he had read it in her modest but loving eye, in the vibration of her sweet, untutored voice; and if not, why that sad reproachful look that he had seen on the young nurse's face in his dreams, as he now knew them *not* to be.

His heart beat quicker when they told him that it was *she* who had eagerly received his inanimate form when first brought into hospital; Sibyl who had chafed his dead hands and bathed his faint temples, and left him not till his returning consciousness made her grateful tears flow like rain, and she was ordered to her own proper post. There was consolation in this.

He wrote a long letter to his good friend, Lady Standish, telling her his romance of real life; entreating her countenance and guidance for his beloved, and commending the brother and sister to her care, and then the Honorable Gerald Erne returned to his

duty in the Twenty-seventh Hussars, encamped on the heights above the English camp before Sebastopol.





CHAPTER XX.

THE CHAMBER OF HORRORS.

On horror's head horrors accumulate.

OTHELLO.

ABOUT the beginning of December, 1854, the names of Captain and Miss Blake appeared in the list of passengers by a homeward mail from Constantinople. They made a quick passage, and arrived safely in England, where they were met by Dr. Martin, who, in obedience to their wishes, had secured for them quiet airy apartments at the West End of London, close to one of the parks; and here the brother and sister settled down for a few weeks, to think over and arrange their future plans.

The blank cheques which Sibyl had received from her father, but had not hitherto needed, relieved them from immediate anxiety as to means. Although they were most moderate in their requirements, there was much expenditure needed to get an outfit for Duncan, suited to his station, and to provide for their daily household necessities.

The good old doctor immediately took Duncan under his professional charge, seeing that much care and time were needed before he could be considered in a safe state of health.

Active inquiries were set on foot to discover the fate of Oliver Blake. His bankers were consulted by his son, who of course was unequal to much personal exertion at this time, but the detectives went to work in real earnest. Duncan found no difficulty in establishing his identity with his father's head clerk, who perfectly remem-

bered him, and the circumstances of his leaving the business suddenly, and enlisting, to the great indignation of Mr. Blake. So the soldier and the old man of business consulted together how they should continue to direct the affairs of the lost man, and decided to keep them within as small a compass as possible, preparatory to winding them up altogether, should no discovery of his existence be made within a given time.

There was a considerable income being paid into the bank; but while Oliver Blake was supposed to be alive, or, rather until there was proof of his death, no one could touch it, beyond the amount for which Sibyl might choose to draw her limited number of cheques.

When all these important matters were set going—when Duncan had begun to realize his new position, and the fact that the high-bred looking girl, whom he could call

sister, was now dependent on him, not only for support and guidance, but for the natural advantages and social position due to one so gifted and constituted ; he bethought him of his letters of introduction, and singling out those to James Paget, Esq., Temple, and Lady Standish, of Standish Park, he sent them with his card and address. It was well he did, for these two friends of Major Erne's were calculated to be of infinite use to him and his sister. The cards were quickly followed by visits from both ; for each had received letters from the Crimea urging them to render all the assistance in their power to the brother and sister, whom they had not hitherto been able to find, and they were both eager to send word to their friend, that they had obeyed his urgent behest.

Paget was at once favourably impressed by Captain Blake's straightforward, manly, soldier-like character ; and entered heart and

soul into the plans for discovering the missing man;—his experience and knowledge were of the greatest service, and it is certain that the pleasure of lending his aid to the cause, was not diminished by the grateful looks it won him from Sibyl's bright eyes.

Lady Standish came up directly from Windsor, excited by the romance of the brother and sister, and, woman like, anxious and interested in her friend's love affair. At once touched by Duncan's heroic conduct, and delicate state of health, and surprised and enthusiastic about Sibyl's grace and beauty, she urged them to pay a long visit to Standish Park. To Sibyl, she dwelt on the fact of country air, and a warm house being beneficial to her brother at that inclement season; and to Duncan on the pleasure she would have in trying to make his sister happy, so that each, nothing loth for them-

selves, would have found it hard to resist such kind pleading for the sake of the other.

It was shortly after their removal to that hospitable roof, that the horrid mystery of their researches was cleared up. After seeking in vain for a clue to the course of conduct that Oliver Blake might have pursued after he last parted from his daughter, and being foiled in their endeavours at every turn, they had almost given up all hope from their own efforts, thinking it must be left to time to unravel the mystery, when Paget insisted on instituting a fresh and more minute examination of the old house and premises in Thames Terrace. The idea had taken possession of him, of the man's having committed suicide under the overwhelming influence of remorse on a cowardly nature, or else of foul play somewhere. The plans that he had made with such seeming care for his daughter and

himself, rather pointed to the latter conclusion.

So once more the old rooms were ransacked from attic to cellar. The ceilings, the walls, the floors were examined. This time no secret could escape detection. Beginning at the top of the house they had completed their search through the bedrooms. The old sitting-room looking on the river, where we first saw Sibyl and her mother. The river flowed by as of old—unmoved by human suffering and aching hearts, holding its secrets and its mysteries buried deep beneath its calm deceptive surface. Ah! could it have cleared up this horrid suspense if it would? Perhaps in retributive justice to the dead gentle lady who loved and found solace in its silent companionship it would hold its secret to the last.

They continued the search, Paget and the police, feeling sure this time that they had

left nothing behind them. All round Oliver's office the boards were sounded; the walls were examined for secret openings, with no result down to the basement, to the cellars.

There was a kind of warehouse cellar that opened to the river on one side, by great folding doors and to the house on the other. This was curiously contrived; but it was easily entered, and there was no appearance of secrecy here—it was half filled with a strange jumble of properties—rich furniture, looking-glasses, marble pedestals, chandeliers, stone basins for fountains, gilt railings, etc., etc.

They had finished their search, and had just concluded that all hope in this quarter was over when—ha! the flood of light that they had let in from the great doors giving on to the river threw a bright gleam on a portion of the wall, illuminating every stain and cobweb, and discovering a small keyhole! On examining this closely it was

evident there was a secret door so cleverly contrived, fitting so closely in a part of the wall into which it was let, that had it not been for the accident of their having moved some pieces of furniture, and thus let the light throw discovery on this keyhole it never could have been perceived. Many keys were tried without avail. The lock was evidently a patent one. A spring lock of delicate workmanship as it afterwards proved; but what can resist the ingenuity of these days, it was only a question of time. Skilful workmen and ingenious implements were fetched, and at last the door splintered, cracked, bulged, and yielded.

What a sight presented itself when daylight illumined that darkened chamber of horrors! It was a closely sealed room, made to keep out damp, dust, air, everything decaying; it was filled with chests, and bags of papers, valuables, gold, jewels. A lantern

stood on the floor, and on one of the chests a candlestick with the remains of grease and wick in the socket, where it had flickered out—a box of matches—and there, lying on the floor with the head and arm resting on one of the desks, was what had once been Oliver Blake. Dead! Dead! among the very treasures that he had heaped together during so many long grinding years of his life, wherewith to dazzle and to triumph over his social enemies at last.

In spite of the many months that had elapsed there was no doubt about this being the master of the house, who lay immured and neglected, and had died a death of starvation in his own cellar, in the midst of his own riches. There was no key in the lock, and none to be found on his person. By his side was a paper, the writing in pencil, it ran thus—

“*July 25, 1854.*—I am murdered, Louis

Morley is the man who has done it; I came down here to get some papers before starting for Turkey—he must have followed me—for, *I saw him* shut the door on me—I rushed toward it too late—it closes with a spring—I looked through the key-hole—the key was gone—I shouted to him—I heard him run away — Morley has murdered me — his damned soul has filled its cup of iniquity.”

“ *July 27th.*—I have tried in vain to make myself heard—I am starved—and faint—God have mercy on my soul”

“ *July 30th.*—and on Morley’s, for I have helped him to work evil”—(the writing here became very irregular and scrawling) “ I have eaten—my candles—the last is going out—oh God—mercy.”

Here it was evident the light was extinguished. There were a few more illegible words and scratches, as if the weak hand had tried to write on in the dark.

Here then was the clearing up of the ghastly mystery. It was well for the brother and sister that Paget had undertaken this duty for them, for it was enough to shock the strongest nerves. Morley! a murderer? it was too horrible!

After a short time spent in pondering over this terrible revelation, the police seeing that great treasure was here amassed, took possession of the room, sealing it up just as it had been found, and on their own responsibility decided that the next step was to hold an immediate coroner's inquest, and, to seek the murderer; while Paget, shocked and horrified, telegraphed to Duncan to come up at once to town, and then wrote a letter to Lady Standish telling her "to break the horrid news gently to Miss Blake as she knew best how to do."

We will not follow the sad details of the clearing up and settling of this horrid affair.

Paget did all that he could to spare the son. The feeling excited in both brother and sister was more that of horror than anything else. By tacit agreement the name of Morley was never mentioned in the family circle.

All that duty and justice to the dead demanded was left to James Paget to arrange, and when weeks passed on without any intelligence of the wretched fugitive it was silently felt by those most nearly concerned, to be an intense relief.

Duncan could not be supposed to feel much affection for the father whom he remembered only as a stern master, and Sibyl had already gone through the grief of his loss. She had sorrowed for him as dead when she reached Constantinople, and the result proved that her instinct had not deceived her.

Sir Thomas and Lady Standish insisted on

keeping them both at Standish until their affairs could be arranged, and they could look forward to some defined course of life for their future.

There was much to be talked over and discussed, and plans suggested and given up again, under which circumstances the quartette speedily became friends.





CHAPTER XXI.

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT.

He that hides a dark soul and foul thought,
Benighted walks under the mid-day sun.

MILTON.

WHILE light was breaking, and better times seemed in store for some of the characters in this history, it fared differently with others. Stern, uncompromising retribution was stealthily but surely creeping closer to its victim. Mr. Louis Morley, of whom we have lost sight ever since the day that he strove, and strove in vain, to prevent Sybil Blake from sailing in the *Nancy Bell* to join her father in Turkey, was a foiled and ruined man—ruined from

the failure of his wicked schemes on which he had depended for the future; foiled, because he had not been *quite* villain enough to carry out his own villany. Before a man embarks on such an unscrupulous devil's venture as Morley had laid down for himself, he must make quite sure that he is not made of flesh and blood like other men, but of stone or steel, or assuredly sooner or later a flaw will appear in the evil structure that will bring it toppling down about the head of its originator.

He had allowed the weakness of human feeling for a woman to distract him from promptly carrying out his scheme of marrying the daughter of his old partner (he still thought in his vanity that it had once been in his power); but must needs waste his time in dallying after "a pale-faced aristocrat," who cared more for another man than for him. He had only succeeded in betraying

himself, and making her hate him ; and now he had brought suspicion on himself by his well-meant but ill-timed effort to spare Sibyl the risks and troubles to which she could not fail to be exposed by her fruitless voyage.

Such were Morley's bitter reflections. He was enraged with himself for the weakness that proved him still to belong to the great human family, though so degraded a member ; while he suffered at the same time a pang of remorse, which, however, was soon smothered in a feeling of intense hatred for his rival. Baffled, furious, despising himself for his failure, hating the whole world, he returned to town after parting with Sibyl, and went at once to his lodgings, in a street leading out of the Strand down to the river. The door was opened by a handsome but dissipated looking young woman, who, after glancing up in his face, and seeing the demon

that was there, quietly returned to the work that she was doing in his sitting-room, without speaking a word. The table was strewn with bits of finery that she was altering.

Sweeping the things on to the floor he swore coarsely and cruelly at her. She must have been accustomed to the treatment, for she neither answered nor blanched under the vile abuse, but gathering up her scraps she left the room without a word.

Bitter and unsatisfactory must have been the meditations of Louis Morley, without a friend to whom he dare trust the extent of his misery and his fear. Aye, *fear*;—fear amounting to terror, was the feeling that had haunted him of late. Sometimes, it is true in society, amongst those who knew him least, the ghost of fear was laid for a space; as for instance in the cheerful circle at Standish; though even there, despite his assumed ease and unconcern of manner, he flinched

from the penetrating eye of James Paget (the man who he knew did not take for granted that everything and everybody were what they seemed); in this case guilty conscience was the accuser, for although Paget cordially disliked the man, it was a mere instinct, and he certainly had no particular suspicions about him *until* the day when he professed to have passed the whole morning in his room, when Paget had seen him follow Gerald Erne through the broiling mid-day sun towards Virginia Water.

The strange lie, and the evil glitter in his eye, afterwards had awakened his suspicions that there was some hidden feeling more serious than would otherwise have appeared in the bandying of a few sharp words at a luncheon table.

Morley's sudden departure from Standish did not tend to lessen the impression; though Paget concluded in his own mind that it had

reference to Miss Vernon; but many events occurred to cause him to forget the circumstance, and even the man himself for a time. The *fête* at Standish, the departure of the 27th Hussars for the Crimea, visits at other country houses, and his own private affairs, banished the subject from his mind, until after circumstances recalled it to his memory.

It was far otherwise with Morley, he was a prey to an indefinable dread,—he left Standish under the impression that the whole party were inimicable to him, and determined to avoid them for some time to come. He thought of them all now as he brooded over his failures. He thought of the fair gentle girl who for months past he had jealously watched and passionately desired to win. She had scorned him. She knew now something of his baseness, and he hated her. He thought of Gerald Erne, his rival with her—and with another; and he hated him. He

was far away in the battle-field, it was true ; a bullet from the enemy might find him out ; or, mortal sickness might lay him low, as it did so many others. What mattered it, he was his rival still ; and he would hate him with a deadly hatred.

He thought of Sibyl—Sibyl as the bright child, who had been, even to him, as a sun-beam in the dark city house ; as the accomplished enthusiastic girl, who had ever welcomed him kindly to her father's home ; as the glorious, self-dependent, brave woman, as he had seen her that day. He thought of her as all this ; and more, for, was she not the one who was to have saved him from himself at last ? He could not hate her ! though she had shrunk from him—though she was lost to him, and all good had gone with her. Though the wicked generally hate those whom they have wronged, Louis Morley could not hate Sibyl

Blake. He had verily wronged her ; a wrong that was the phantom that haunted him ; though now as his thoughts once more centred on it, the love of self and greed re-asserted its mastery, and his lips muttered : “ The key ! had I but the key ; weak fool that I was to throw it in the river ; I might have gone back safely now and helped myself.”

By degrees the evil mood passed, and his fears lessened. After all there was no cause for alarm yet. He would stay where he was, and watch the course of events. He had means enough to go on a little while yet ; besides, it was best to keep a look-out on that house. He must keep quiet and watch. He could always cross the water when there was sign of danger—etc., etc., and so the guilty man strove to re-assure himself—and weeks and months passed on.

When Sybil wrote home from Scutari to

have inquiries made for her father, it is needless to say that Morley's assistance was nominal, being directed to give a false clue, if any. The only other person to direct the search was Dr. Martin, and besides the constant occupation of his profession, the old man was so incredulous in the mystery of Oliver Blake's disappearance, from his firm conviction that the unfortunate man was an unnatural scoundrel, who, for some purpose of his own, had deserted his child and really gone into hiding, perhaps abroad, perhaps to America, that he took no energetic steps likely to be effectual, and the affair dropped, until the brother and sister set to work in earnest, with the invaluable aid of Mr. Paget, and all the apparatus of the detective force at their disposal. Then at times Morley trembled for himself; but still he stayed on, unable to tear himself away from the neighbour-

hood. He rarely showed himself now, but made use of the woman whom he ill-treated, to watch the proceedings closely, and keep him informed of everything that took place in Thames Terrace. After the first examination of the house had taken place, and no discovery had been made, he breathed freely, and his courage rose so much that he began to return to his old life, to be seen in his old haunts, and to feel as if the danger was past; but the vigilance of the woman Nancy never flagged. He had never told her the extent of his crime, but she knew, or guessed, that it was serious enough to endanger his liberty, if not his life. A woman's wit is a keen weapon of defence when employed for the man she loves, however degraded the feeling may be. Nancy watched when there no longer seemed occasion for caution. It was she who knew of the last search of the old house and premises;

she who was near the spot when the awful discovery was made, and though she knew not exactly *what* it was, instinct warned her that no time was to be lost; so that when, from her hiding place, she heard Paget's voice, in answer to inquiries by the police, give the address of Morley's lodging, she flew back to him as fast as her legs would carry her. He was at home, and in a more comfortable and complacent mood than he had often known of late; but in a moment, when he saw the woman's white anxious face, he scented danger. She whispered in a husky, breathless voice, "Quick, quick—you must run—they have found it all out—they are coming—there's not a moment to lose! Here," moving to a drawer where she kept her money—her own money—all that she had in the world, and giving him the whole contents, "Here, take it—quick—run down to the river; this way—at the back (almost

dragging him after her), there is a collier just going to sail to the north—the “Aurora;” I know the master, Joe Potter, he is my brother; say you are a friend of Nancy’s—show him gold, and jump in—quick, quick, he was to start at half-past three.”

They had got down stairs by this time, and stood in a little passage between the houses, that led quickly to the river. She caught his hand for a moment. “Good-bye,” that was all; he turned quickly away without a word; the woman ran back and fastened the door; her task was not over, and she knew it. She returned up stairs, and sat down to wait. She had not been much too soon, though it seemed to her an age; it was not long before a ring came at the bell. She went to the door herself. Two gentlemen (they were detectives really) asked for “Mr. Morley?”

“Not at home, sir.”

“Is he likely to be in soon, do you think? We should be sorry not to see him.”

The clock on the chimney piece struck three o'clock.

“I think he may, would you like to step in and wait a short time on the chance of his coming?”

She thought herself clever in thus giving him time to escape, and she was right—she had outwitted the detectives—her unconcerned, but respectful manner took them in. They accepted the invitation, and she ushered them into the sitting-room, gave them newspapers to beguile the time, and left them.

A glance round the room made it evident that the man they sought was not only living there, but as the woman said, was probably coming back immediately, for his letters and papers were scattered about, his desk even lying open on the table. They would wait patiently. The clock struck the half hour.

They waited on—the short winter light waned, it was foggy and dark when the clock struck four. The gas had been lighted for some time in the street before the two men rang the bell to say that they “Could not wait any longer, but hoped to be able to call again before long and to be more fortunate in finding Mr. Morley at home.” They had not, however, wasted the short space of daylight that the winter afternoon had accorded them, for with deft and unhesitating fingers they had turned over all the papers in the open desk. There were several that were rather suspicious-looking; but one document specially engrossed their attention, and was quickly transferred to one of their own pockets.

It was written on the outside, “Oliver Blake’s will.” It was a will, supposed to have been made by Oliver Blake, dated the day *after* his disappearance, as was proved by

later investigation, leaving a small portion of his property only to his daughter and only living child, Sibyl, and all the remainder to his best friend, Louis Morley, whom he considered in the light of a son, as the future husband of his said daughter, but should such marriage not take place, then his property was to be divided into two equal parts as nearly as might be, between Sibyl and Morley. The signatures were there, and those of witnesses but, need it be said,—it was an entire forgery.

The two policemen, tolerably satisfied with their work, but now more than ever intent on taking their man, left the house, but did not lose sight of it. Day and night from that hour it was watched—watched to see Morley return to the trap ; but day after day passed and he did not come. By the time it dawned on them that they had been outwitted—the woman was gone !



CHAPTER XXII.

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME.

Ring out wild bells to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light ;
The year is dying in the night :
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

TENNYSON.

CHRISTMAS at Standish was a time of busy bounty.

Perhaps there is no season so differently spent according to the various feelings, habits, and bringing up of families and individuals. To some it is solely a festival of the Church ; a time of extra services and hard work. To others it is an opportunity for dissipation and unusual self-indulgence ; but there are almost as many shades of

opinion and practice between these extremes as there are households or individuals.

The unclouded happiness, the ideal Christmas time, belongs exclusively to youth.

In later life it is too often an anniversary which points to the gaps in our circle—

“There is no fireside, howsoe’er defended,
But has one vacant chair.”

and to those who have lived long enough to have “loved and lost,” it is scarcely possible but that the poet’s words too aptly express their Christmas feeling when his heart cried out in his bereavement,

“At our old pastime in the hall,
We gambol’d making vain pretence
Of gladness,” etc., etc.

But, in one respect, there is an universal sentiment throughout the Christian world, from regal homes, where costly gifts are interchanged and scattered recklessly, to

the whitewashed workhouse, where extra plums are added to the paupers' pudding—among high and low, rich and poor, sick or sorry, in *some* way of their own the blessed season *is kept*. Christmas at Standish was bountiful. It was a goodly healthy sight to see long tables groaning under piles of flannels, of blankets and warm bedding, packets of tea, great joints of beef, and plum puddings, ranged neatly for distribution—other special gifts for special favourites, but something for all the hungry and the needy—to watch the eager, anxious faces pouring into the great hall, where high up on the walls hung trophies of stags' antlers keeping *their* Christmas in supporting boughs of glistening holly that, uniting, formed a huge wreath, beneath which stood, radiant with the grace of charity, stately Helen Standish, the lady giver of the bounty. It was plea-

sant to see the happy answering smile spread over pale faces at the genial words accompanying each gift; to hear the hearty "God bless you, my lady," and "Happy Christmas, Sir Thomas," from old and young—to watch the brilliant patches of colour in the home landscape; of the women in their new red cloaks returning from the neighbouring villages along the snow-swept paths; it was a pleasant and a goodly sight in truth, and not the less on this Christmas of 1854, that Lady Standish was surrounded by eager, ready helpers, in the persons of her friends, Sibyl and Duncan Blake, James Paget, and Hetty Domville. To the brother and sister it was a novel sight, a new page of existence opened to them—the Rich giving to the Poor, the Poor blessing the Rich, genial interest and mutual sympathy uniting them into one great brotherhood for time and eternity; it was a fresh

phase of healthy human life that found a ready response in their own natures and helped to dissipate the feeling of loneliness and isolation that their peculiar circumstances might have engendered.

In the group was a well-known face ; where there was work to be done, and help to be given to his friends, there, of course, James Paget was sure to be found. He frequently ran down to Standish at this time, methodically assisted in all the arrangements, and now, by ready kindly jokes brought down to the level of the company, he kept the villagers in good humour while they waited for their turn in the tide of fortune.

“ He be a rum un, *to* be sure.”

“ Aye, but a nice spoken gentleman, bain’t he, now ? ” “ he *do* be droll ; ” “ and good company as ever I knowed,” were the style of appropriate remarks that followed him

down the hall as he left men and women chuckling behind him.

Hetty, too, did her part—kept strict watch over her table of tea—studying her lists and counting her packets with immense efforts at mental concentration—bringing all her powers of arithmetic into requisition: addition of old women—subtraction of packets—division of attention, etc., etc.—it was hard work, for she was so anxious to prove helpful to Lady Standish that she was quite determined to be practical and business-like, to allow no temptations to divert her attention. Once, early in the day, she allowed the wounded interesting hero, Captain Blake, to pass by without even looking up; later on, when her duties became less arduous, she could not resist glancing occasionally in the direction where he had been ensconced by the great hall fire in the traditional beehive chair; and now and then

her business-like gravity utterly broke down, as some joke or sally of James Paget's reached her, and then the merry peal from the little figure in deep black with the round flushed cheeks was a pleasant sound to hear.

Mrs. and Miss Domville had been invited to Standish at this time that they might make the acquaintance of Miss Blake, and hear from her all the sad particulars of poor Harry's last days. The poor mother, as was natural, was more broken in health than ever after this blow; and Hetty in her deep mourning looked changed and greatly subdued; and had wept piteously when Sibyl repeated to her the details of the illness and death that she had watched. At hearing poor Harry's last words her sobs had broken forth afresh; but she was young, she had not witnessed, and therefore could not fully realise her sorrow, nor the extent of the loss

she had sustained. She was not really wanting in feeling, but she *could* not be sad long together. After the painful subject had been thoroughly exhausted, and she had cried herself to sleep, she tried to put it away from her with apparent success, for at times her hilarious spirits broke out in her old fashion to the amusement of some of the party, but to the scandal of her poor mother. Besides, Hetty was a natural flirt, and even at such a time she could not altogether resist coquetting with the handsome officer who was thrown in her way. Hetty always did herself great injustice by her silly little ways, for there was more sense in her giddy little head, as well as feeling in her inexperienced heart, than she allowed to appear. Poor Harry's "bloodhound pup," grown into a great struggling, bouncing dog, had been Mrs. and Miss Domville's riotous travelling companion, and though it was henceforth

called "Miss Vernon's dog," it never again left Standish.

Sibyl took an opportunity of questioning the unsuspecting Hetty about "this Isabel Vernon, whom your poor brother seems to have been fond of."

"Oh," she replied, "I did fancy that Harry was a little sentimental about her, but you know there was Captain Erne, and that horrid Mr. Morley, and I thought they were both a little in love with her. Besides, Isabel was older than Harry, and I am sure she only liked him as 'a nice dear boy,' as she used to call him to me. Isabel Vernon is so pretty, Miss Blake; do you know her?"

"No," Sibyl had answered, "but I believe she is coming here by-and-by." So the subject had dropped, and was never renewed between them. Sibyl had felt that to ask more questions would be like prying unfairly into the secrets of the absent one, and per-

haps she had also a dread of knowing more. The busy day of charity and the busy Christmas week came to an end at last. It had been given up to works of kindness and pleasant home life, but on New Year's Eve other guests began to arrive to fill the old house for the beginning of the New Year, and among them Mrs. Vernon and Isabel, and the Honourable Reginald Erne, Gerald's young brother.

It was a curious and trying medley of conflicting elements for unsophisticated Sibyl, inexperienced as she was in such social difficulties, to steer through with any comfort and dignity. To have to appear on easy terms of intercourse with Isabel! her supposed and dreaded rival—with Reginald Erne! so deeply interesting to her as the brother of him she had loved, and he to be as absolutely nothing to her! unconscious hitherto of her very existence, unsuspecting even now of the link that was between them.

Although she daily became more attached to Lady Standish, it was natural that, despite the constant kindness and watchfulness of her new friend and hostess, she should often feel solitary in the midst of the cheerful group assembled.

Duncan was in a similar position, without health or animal spirits or woman's tact to help him, and so it came to be that just at this time the brother and sister spent many an hour in each other's private rooms, where, Sibyl settling her invalid before a good fire in an easy chair, and taking another herself, they made a little home for themselves, where they read and worked, and gradually talked out their past lives to each other, till, by degrees, use wore the pain away, and memory wandered backwards till it brought them to childhood's early days, and they were boy and little child again. Their hearts were laid bare to each other, except one sacred

hidden spot in each. Sibyl never mentioned Gerald Erne, unless under cover of the most cautious and apparently unconcerned questioning, which failed to arouse the slightest suspicion of the truth in the mind of her brother, who always felt he had his own secret to guard: and Duncan carefully concealed from his sister the worship he had so long indulged in of Isabel, usually avoiding even mention of her name; indeed, when Mrs. and Miss Vernon arrived, the two met with so slight a recognition, that, but for the mother's more *empresée* greeting, a stranger looking on would scarcely have known whether or not it was their first meeting: for though, when Duncan was formally introduced as "Captain 'Blake,'" a bright flush overspread Isabel's fair face, it might have been from the effects of the journey, in the frosty air, and Duncan's cheek could scarcely grow paler than it usually was at this time.



CHAPTER XXIII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

Every one can master a grief but he that has it.

“MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.”

SOMETIMES during this visit Sibyl wondered whether her brother's fancy was being taken captive by Miss Domville's youthful attractions, for they were often together, and her high spirits and childish fun seemed to amuse him; but Hetty's attempts at fascination fell harmless on Captain Blake, and the experience was good practise for him.

It need not be said that he hitherto had seen nothing of life in its most varied and puzzling aspect of—woman!

He had looked on from afar at womankind, as the good mariner watches the star in the heavens, or the misguided wanderer follows the lurid light that leads to the Slough of Despond and leaves him there; but, never nearer. Woman seen from afar! A life-time of study on the mysterious subject is but the beginning of knowledge! Outwardly, the result probably of school-room discipline or of conventional training in some form, women may seem to resemble each other; but, in reality, they differ as the flicker of a farthing rushlight is different from the glory of the summer's sun. There are those who are more variable than the weather; others more steadfast than the rock; those who are shallower than a babbling brooklet, or more unfathomable than the deepest sea. Some who are timid at a spider—fearless in face of danger. Some vain and cold-hearted; some self-sacrificing and passionately reckless

for those they love, or in the cause of duty. And there are some, who are nearly all this together.

How can woman ever hope to be understood by the other sex, or man expect to fathom the mystery?

Poor Duncan, worn, weather-beaten soldier as he was, was still a boy, in the rudiments of this deep subject, but in the atmosphere he now breathed he was likely to make rapid progress.

Hetty's thoughtless ways laid her open to much misconstruction from the censorious after all. It must be remembered that there was much of deep interest to her that Captain Blake could tell : little details of Harry in the regiment—above all his one great first and last day of actual engagement with the enemy. It was curious how often their conversations came round to histories in which Colonel Swift figured. Captain Blake seemed

never tired of talking of him, and was pleased and astonished to find Hetty a good listener on this subject. The two men, although hitherto in such different positions, had evidently seen much of each other. There were many anecdotes of past times. Indian reminiscences (in which often it unconsciously was evident that Duncan had shared), that were always recounted as throwing credit on Swift; his merits as an officer, his goodness of heart, his generous unselfishness, etc.

These conversations were often cut short by Sibyl or Miss Vernon drawing near to join them, and then the abrupt silence that came over Duncan was not unlikely to give a mistaken impression of his relations with Miss Domville.

At this time young Erne was no unimportant member of the little coterie. He was a fine young fellow, an undergraduate at Christchurch, who at present thought more

of training for the Oxford "Eight" than of going in for his degree. He was popular among his college friends; he showed a strong family likeness in face and voice to his elder brother Gerald, but had not the same peculiar suavity and charm of manner, and was still shy with women, so that it was pleasant to him to find a girl like Hetty Domville, with "no nonsense about her," ready to be pleased and amused and to meet his rather awkward advances quite half way: ready for any fun or flirtation, and yet a little sobered just now, in appearance, at all events, and rendered more interesting by the deep mourning she wore and the cause for it, which was well known.

Watchful Lady Standish was once or twice half afraid that Hetty had gone too far, or that young Erne was getting much more serious than Hetty supposed.

It is only fair to Hetty, however, to believe

that it was not due to coquetry alone that she would often make room for Mr. Paget or Captain Blake to sit beside her, and seem contented with their society as long as they cared to remain, although on such occasions the foolish child may have felt some little vain satisfaction at seeing Reginald Erne walk off and sit taciturn, and alone, with a dull book open before him, or clumsily and vainly endeavour to get up a fierce flirtation with Miss Vernon.

James Paget always treated Hetty with a paternal intimacy and kindness mixed with no slight flavour of chaff, which in her old days used to rouse her indignation and childish anger, but now was her great amusement, for, ever since the episode of the water-lilies, she had felt for him an affectionate veneration which quenched all flirting propensities, and only made her anxious to please and be useful to him.

He understood her perfectly, and they were very good friends, but that was all. So Reginald Erne need not have felt jealous of Mr. Paget, nor had he more cause to do so as regarded Captain Blake, but the young fellow had yet to learn that, especially in drawing-room life, "things are not always what they seem."

It would have surprised him, no doubt, had he known that the subject of the long talks, of which he was so jealous, was generally the absent Colonel Swift—Swift—the middle-aged, iron grey-headed, terrier-looking little man, who, although he was a general favourite, would have been considered "an old fellow" by Mr. Erne.

Hetty was not older than Reginald Erne, but she had already seen more of men of thought and action than he had, and though she said "boys" like himself were "good fun," and "*pleasant pour passer le temps,*"

she, like most young girls who have had the opportunity, preferred the attentions of older men, and it needed one more truly a man, one to whom she could look up, and learn from, to really attract the serious feelings of her heart, especially since that fatal day of Balaclava, and the death of Harry—since she had been haunted by the look and tone of Major Swift on that last starry, giddy night of the *fête*, when they parted at Standish—his white eager look when he begged for the flower from her bosom, which she had bestowed with coquettish indifference.

A pang of regret had shot through her when on that eventful night as the drag carried him with the rest of his brother officers out of sight, she thought that he pressed something (was it her flower?)—to his lips.

She had not thought much about it for some time after—not till she heard of Bala-

clava, and read the fatal list of killed and wounded; her interest and anxiety was first for her young brother, but then, next to Harry, for her kind friend, Major Swift, before all others; and ever since then, ever since the danger he had been in, but had escaped, his homely, comely face had often come back to her as she had last seen it, for there was a *reality* of feeling in it, such as she had not known before nor since.

Even now, surrounded as she was by friends, everything at Standish recalled those past days. She missed the kind presence that, ever watchful, used to hover about her, and hearing him spoken of as she did, seeing the esteem in which he was held by other men, she began to be proud of the interest she had once roused in the heart of the brave, and now well-known, colonel of the crack regiment, the 27th Hussars; and she wondered that so slight

a thing as she in reality deemed herself—and was—should have had the power to move, even for a moment, such a man. All this, however, did not prevent her flirting just as much with “the boy Reginald,” as she called him, nor with any one else who came in her way; for to flirt was as natural to Hetty as to breathe.

Mrs. and Miss Vernon did not pay a long visit to Standish on this occasion, nor did they get on as well with the Blakes as their hostess had desired.

Sibyl had her own reasons for not caring to make a friend of the agreeable young lady, who seemed so ready to be intimate with her. Duncan was shy and reserved, at all events with Isabel—he also supposing her to be attached, if not engaged, to Major Erne. He did not trust himself to be much in her society, taking refuge from himself by addressing his conversation to Hetty,

but generally associating with the men of the party, when not keeping his own room, which his still delicate health often rendered necessary.

The New-year's guests dispersed, and occasionally others came and went. Thus many weeks of winter passed under the care of the kind owners of Standish, and every day drew Helen Standish and Sibyl Blake closer together, and, developing fresh treasures of mind in each, taught them to know and value one another above all other women.

Lady Standish no longer wondered at the force of the love that had supplanted her pet and gentle Isabel with Gerald Erne: one was as "moonlight is to sunlight," and "as water is to wine." She wrote once to Captain Erne, telling him how things were going on, setting his mind at rest about the safety of Sibyl, and promising to watch over

her as a mother. Long and often she pondered over the probable fate of these lovers; but the war went on, and Gerald's very life was so uncertain, that to the girl she kept silence on the subject. It was the one and only topic of mutual reserve between them.

Duncan gradually gained strength; from time to time he went up to town, where Paget met him, and the two consulted and went about together, and got through an immense amount of business, it would seem, according to the soldier's reports on his return to the ladies on these occasions. It proved that Oliver Blake had left a very large fortune; no will could be discovered—it was the belief that he had never made one—so there were only the two children to divide the property equally; and it proved great enough to put them both in the worldly position that their unfortunate father had coveted. It then became an object of

great interest to their good host and hostess to fit them for, and teach them the management of, so great worldly responsibilities.

There were immense advantages for both brother and sister in their association with their highly cultivated and refined friends, whose hearts they had taken by storm.

Though well bred by instinct and by nature, this was just the life and experience they needed and had never had, and into which perhaps they would never have been so thoroughly and gently initiated, but for the kind tact and friendship of Lady Stan-dish. She gave them time to accustom themselves to the various little elegant conventionalities, which came almost naturally to natures like theirs. Then she gradually began to introduce them into the society she rightly deemed the best and safest. At her urgent entreaty the visit was prolonged from week to week, and month to month.

In this genial atmosphere of love and encouragement, Sibyl's glorious voice again broke forth, richer and mellower for its long rest, having gained in pathos from the experience and trials, which had converted the sensitive girl of the days of Thames Terrace into the equally tender but more self-contained woman. Her song filled now the ancient halls of Standish, and the hearts of those who assembled there.

Often in the witching hour of twilight, when all else was silent save the crackling of wood on the hearth, which threw sudden lights and shadows over the richly furnished luxurious room, her touching voice rose and fell in grand cadence or plaintive melody, enchanting her new friend, who, buried in the shade of some couch, would lose herself in grave or busy reverie, according to the mood of the hour.



CHAPTER XXIV.

SHADOWS OF THE PAST.

God made the country,
And man the town.

COWPER.

THE winter of the early part of the year 1855 passed away quietly enough to the friends at Standish Park, and now, the logs no longer crackled on the hearth, “the last long streak of snow had vanished,” doors and windows stood open to catch the sweet fresh air, the little birds chirped forth their gladness: the nightingale sang his song of love, the woodpigeon softly cooed to its mate, the joyous notes of the lark rang out—branch and blossom put forth its green. The exten-

sive gardens of Standish glowed again with gorgeous laburnam, drooping its golden riches towards its exquisite neighbour, the delicate lilac; while close by the snow-white balls of the guelder hung heavy with glistening dew-drops, and the sweet-briar unfolded its modest fragrance. All nature vied in welcoming Spring, and by song, and verdure, and glittering hues, seemed to cry out: the Winter is past, the Summer has come!

The lanes and hedge-rows were gay with hyacinth, and wild rose, and strawberry, and a hundred tiny wonders opening their many-coloured eyes to the sunshine, while the rich sweet meadows, crowded with buttercups, gave promise of plenty.

Oh beautiful earth! Oh happy spring-time! Is it some instinct foreshadowing the great resurrection to undying life that makes all creation periodically spring forth in joy and beauty to give glory to its Author?

The tiny blue forget-me-not by the brook-side, the insect buzzing in the sunbeam, the mother bird nestling over her brood, the lamb gambolling in the young grass, the boy shouting in very lightness of heart, the young man exulting in his youth and strength, his pulses throbbing delight in the mere sense of existence—each and all testify their gladness and give glory to their Creator.

Aye, glorious spring-time of the earth, promise of an abundant harvest. Hopeful spring-time of life, giving earnest of bright deeds to be done!

Make the most of your little day, oh ye green things. Rejoice while ye may, ye gladsome ones, while the eye is bright and the lip is red, for it *may* be when the sap is high the nipping frost will blight; when ye think ye hold happiness in your hands, a sudden grief may wither it in your grasp; and when sorrow has found its home in the heart,

all that once made rapture there—the deep blue of the skies, the bloom on the swelling hills, the sweet breath of the breeze, all sensuous beauty—only deepens the anguish of the soul in its hour of darkness, and the music that nature once made there is silenced or changed to a wailing chant; but despair not, ye sorrowing ones. Blessed be God the seasons fail not—spring brings to you again hope in the promise of an eternal resurrection and an undying reunion. Year after year—comforting spring-time. Earnest of our great desire. In every tiny blade of grass, in each bud that opens, we will see the assurance of our hope.

* * * * *

Standish park looked very lovely in the spring and early summer of 1855; but much of its beauty was wasted as far as its possessors were concerned; for, in obedience to the law of fashion and custom, Sir Thomas

and Lady Standish were up in town for the season, and excepting that Sir Thomas often ran down for a look at the farm, etc., when two or three rooms were prepared for his use, the halls of Standish were deserted for a longer time this season than usual.

Lady Standish had her time and sympathies well filled. Her friends Sibyl and Duncan Blake had been dependent on her superior knowledge and experience for all their arrangements and domestic concerns in forming a home, as well as for their introduction into society. Under her guidance the brother and sister had taken a small but elegantly fitted house so near to her that Sibyl could hasten to her friend under all her small difficulties, messages and notes were constantly going backwards and forwards, and the two ladies were constant companions in driving, shopping, etc. The brother and sister were now sought for in

Lady Standish's train at all the *fêtes* and fashionable gatherings, where Sibyl's remarkable loveliness soon caused Miss Blake to be proclaimed one of the beauties of the season, and Duncan's handsome face and extreme unaffectedness of manner won admiration from men and women alike. The cause of his delicate appearance was soon known, and his pale bronzed cheek, and the languor that fatigue quickly brought to his deep blue eye, went straight to many a feminine heart.

Sibyl, who had seen her brother so near death and knew the depths of weakness from which he had rallied, congratulated herself on his present state, believing that time only was needed for all to be well; but Lady Standish watched his health with anxiety; he had reached a certain point of convalescence beyond which it did not seem to her that he advanced; he did not gain more strength;

he could not take any exertion without suffering acute pain in his chest. "He must take life very easily at present," the doctors said. He was to be seen almost daily in the throng of riders in the row mounted on a magnificent horse, that had been selected for its smooth easy paces as much as for its beauty, rarely joining in the rapid rushes of the energetic, exercise-seeking equestrians, but riding leisurely under the shade. Even among the crowd of horsemen, it was a figure that could not pass unnoticed. Many a fair head would turn to take a second glance at the calm handsome face, the broad shoulders and upright seat, as some *habitué* of the park would whisper, "a Balaclava man," as they passed him. Miss Vernon, who had never thoroughly recovered her nerve since the accident of the year before, again rode out frequently, although on a safer animal than the wicked chestnut.

Did she, as she would descry from a distance riding slowly towards her, the handsome, the wealthy, the courted hero and pet' of the season, the aristocratic looking Captain Blake—did she ever recall the day when she awaited him in Standish Park, and he stood before her as a mere messenger—"a common soldier"—but even then looking like a knight awaiting his guerdon from the hand of his ladye-love to bear it proudly in the tournament—looking very much as he did now? I think she did!

Did she ever recall the warm, sweet summer's morning when she lay under the shade of the old tree, in a sort of fairy, unnatural land, with a vague, dreamy consciousness that the leaves were twittering above her head, and the air blowing in her hair, and that some one was caring for, and tending her, and calling on her, and that it was *this* man, who had risked his life for

hers, and had been allowed to go away unnoticed?

I think she did. But in the early days of their acquaintance at this time Captain Blake was not very approachable to Miss Vernon. She found him reserved, and silent, though she saw him talk easily and pleasantly enough to others. She never for a moment found herself alone by his side; she could almost fancy that he avoided her. Isabel could not understand it; she was unused to indifference, real or assumed, and she felt hurt almost, and piqued, and certainly thought a great deal more on the subject than she would like to have admitted. She decided at last that it was perfectly natural, that it was her own fault, that Captain Blake must think her the most ungrateful, cold-blooded, heartless girl in the world.

So one day when Duncan had joined a lively party, of whom Isabel was one, and

they had for the second time reached that end of the ride near where the accident had happened, in turning round she suddenly brought her horse close by the side of his, and said somewhat abruptly:

“Oh, Captain Blake, do you remember that day that you saved my life here—how ungrateful you must have thought me, if you ever thought about it at all—for I never half thanked you; but indeed I am not ungrateful. I owe my life to you, and I think about it very, very often.”

It was not what she had meant to say, but it was out, and she was blushing crimson.

Duncan was quite unprepared for this attack. “Did he remember!—if he ever thought at all!” Had not the recollection of those blissful moments when he held her in his arms, and chafed her little hands, and there was no one but himself to help her, been ever present with him—in camp, and in

the field, in loneliness and in suffering, day and night, his one joy, his luxury ; and now that he was schooling himself for the sake of honour to the absent, to deaden the past, and to forget as much as possible, here was she by his side reminding him of it, and looking kindly at him, and thinking of it “very often.”

His heart beat so violently that he could scarcely breathe, and for a moment his eyes flashed out the love pent up there. Isabel never forgot that look—but it was only for an instant. The sharp pain of his wound shot through his chest, recalling him to a sense of the present, and recovering his composure quickly, he slightly lifted his hat, and replied in the light bantering tone that was daily becoming easier to him, from intercourse with the circle in which he lived—that atmosphere of chaffing, unreal, surface-talk and manner so common in the

present day—a manner that serves as a cloak to hide the real character and sentiments of a man, till, from living constantly in the world and persistently keeping on the false garment, it becomes so much a habit that the real man finds it difficult to cast it off when he would, and many a complication and misconception of feelings ensue, which perhaps greater simplicity might avoid. It is the most extreme, though the most clever, *affectation* of ease and naturalness of manner.

It was very contrary to the nature of Duncan Blake, but he, too, found it useful and almost necessary at times in the life which now surrounded him. Lady Standish had soon introduced her friends, the Vernons and the Blakes, to each other, and seemed anxious to encourage an intimacy between them. At first sight nothing seemed easier. Mrs. Vernon readily lent her aid, for when she found that Isabel's

“preserver,” Duncan Meredith Blake, was after all not only a gentleman by birth, but the son of her old friend and playmate, Kate Meredith, and now an officer, a hero, and a man of wealth, her enthusiasm knew no bounds.

Isabel had from the first been naturally interested in the romantic history of the brother and sister, and was charmed with Sibyl. So at first sight there seemed nothing easier than that they should become friends, and that their friendship might be a mutual and agreeable advantage, Lady Standish argued. The elder ladies might plan as they liked—the families were frequently meeting at one house or the other—but for some time there was a tacit kind of reserve and stiffness on the part of the Blakes that prevented intimacy. Duncan, as the reader knows, was under the conviction that Miss Vernon was engaged to his Major, and now almost his

friend, Gerald Erne. He had arrived at that conclusion on very slight grounds, but at a time when his mind was morbidly sensitive with regard to the inferiority of his own position, and what he considered his degradation, and once fixed there, he had dwelt upon it as a fact, and nothing had since occurred to lead him to doubt it. So he set out upon the oft-tried and difficult course of indulging himself with the constant society of the woman he loved, but whom he believed to belong to another, determined to be on his guard and to conceal his own sentiments. With what success we shall see. The peculiarity of the position naturally affected his usually open and unaffected manner, making him appear to Isabel unaccountably variable—sometimes reserved almost to what looked like hauteur, or a rude indifference—at others as charming as society generally found him.

With Sibyl the case was somewhat similar—or, at all events, produced the same result. In Isabel Vernon she could but see her successful rival. The poor girl's faith and affections had, as we know, suffered a great blow. She had struggled to forget the scene in the long walk between Isabel and Morley, of which she had been an unperceived spectator, and the words overheard which had seemed to make it clear to her jealous heart that the lovely girl before her had won the love she had believed to be hers. She had passed through the deepest depths of anguish and self-humiliation before pride and the healing power of active deeds of charity had enabled her in a measure to conquer what she deemed her misplaced affection, and to forget self, in the hope of happiness for him whom she had loved unguardedly. In her beautiful unconsciousness she had even succeeded in acknowledging to

herself that it was natural and fitting that such a man as Gerald Erne should be attracted by a lovely girl of his own rank and position of life, as Isabel had appeared to her, but "oh," she mentally added to this reflection, "he shouldn't have come—he shouldn't have come."

The meeting in the hospital at Scutari had renewed the conflict in her heart. Gerald's agitated appearance on the landing stage at the last moment had perplexed and excited her; but constant occupation after that—the care of her invalid brother, the discovery of their father's fate, the novelty of her life, and the friendship of Lady Standish—had helped her to put away the past.

When she met Isabel Vernon all the old bitterness of feeling was roused. It was none other but her rival of whom she was expected to make a friend. It felt unnatural and impossible. Isabel was often pained by the

fruitlessness of her kind attempts to overcome the stately reserve of the girl whom she admired so much, and who was evidently so natural and affectionate with their mutual friend, Lady Standish.

That observant lady saw the want of sympathy between her two pets, and wondered, and regretted it, but wisely abstained from taking any notice, trusting to time to make them appreciate one another, or to clear up misconceptions, if they existed. Before long, however, Sibyl's just and generous nature found it impossible to hold out against the gentle, lady-like, and winsome ways of her supposed rival, and reminding herself that Isabel was not to blame for her trouble, that probably, indeed certainly, she could never have heard of her, Sibyl's, existence until now, and was guiltless of doing her an intentional wrong, she yielded at last willingly and graciously to the necessity of

their being friends ; it seemed inevitable, and the two girls were constituted to appreciate one another. They were always meeting, too, at Lady Standish's house, in public places, in private parties. Then Mrs. Vernon was constantly making some pleasant plan which brought them together, and Isabel was sure to make it agreeable to everyone.

Duncan also, after a little time, whatever his motives might be, was always ready to encourage these meetings, although, to the surprise of Sibyl, after being eager to arrange any engagement with the Vernons, he would, when actually with them, be shy, silent, and far more reserved than herself. He never voluntarily missed an opportunity of meeting Isabel ; consequently they saw a great deal of each other at this time. Captain Blake never danced, but his pale face might be seen night after night in crowded,

heated ball-rooms, at dinners, at *fêtes*, at any gatherings, dull or gay, where Isabel was likely to be. Always thus taxing his small stock of strength beyond its power, it was easy to see by the languor and utter weariness of his movements, and the expression of pain in his face, when he had been disappointed by not meeting her.

Did he find pleasure in Miss Vernon's society? It would be difficult to say. Sometimes, after giving himself trouble and inconvenience to meet her, he would avoid looking in her direction, and seem purposely to keep out of her way for a whole evening. At others, encouraged by a welcoming smile, and blinded to all consequences by a bright glance from her eye, he would pass whole evenings by her side, sit out with her in supper rooms and balconies, till she forgot her engagements, and was often now missing when the dance began and ended—an error

she had never before been prone to—monopolise her for whole afternoons, and occasionally break out into brilliant flashes of conversation, or soften to a mood of unusual unreserve, while his expressive eye would light up with intelligence, or melt with a tenderness, calculated to be very dangerous to the peace of mind of any ordinary young lady.





CHAPTER XXV.

MOUNT IDA.

The grand old name of gentleman,
Defamed by every charlatan,
And soiled with all ignoble use.

TENNYSON.

HOW was Miss Vernon affected by the unaccountable changes and alterations of manner in the man whom she had known in the ranks—whom she now saw courted by all the mothers and admired by all the daughters whom she met? At one time shy, haughty, reserved; at another, easy, and genial; by turns timid and uncertain and perfectly self-possessed. Did she think that already the flattering world was spoiling this simple soldier?

I must exonerate her from such a suspicion. After close observation, she had discovered that Captain Blake was courteous and even-tempered and self-possessed to the world in general—that his manner varied to her only.

Ah Isabel! When you stood near your Queen, as she graciously bestowed her rewards of valour on her brave soldiers, and then recognized this man, suffering and worn, but noble in his weakness, as he came forward to his Sovereign, who smiled sympathy in his haggard face, and with her own hand fastened the decoration on his breast, and the words, “Captain Blake, 27th Hussars, Balaclava, cut to pieces,” were murmured in your ear—did no flutter of the pulse forecast your future?—no flush of emotion and pride give warning of the fire that was kindling in that hitherto calm, well-regulated heart?

I know not. In the early days of Isabel's acquaintance with the Blakes, she found it hard to know herself.

This fashionable beauty had been so accustomed to have worshippers around her, that, if not indifferent to their adoration, she had accepted it as a matter of course, a matter of right; and although she enjoyed the sensation, and it gratified her *amour propre*, to a degree of which she was quite unconscious, she had been very slightly disturbed by it; if she had ever warmed slightly towards any of her victims, it had been, not from spontaneous feeling, but only from the reflected glow of their passion.

She had, as we know, felt a passing sentimental friendship for Gerald Erne, which, with opportunity and encouragement, might have developed into a feeling somewhat warmer; but circumstances had been against

it, and she had accepted them calmly and contentedly.

Now, in the early days of her acquaintance with the Blakes, she felt as she had never done before. She was nervous, restless, disturbed—strangely indifferent, if not impatient, of the homage she had hitherto exacted from general acquaintances. Poor Mrs. Vernon would often be surprised and vexed to find her placid daughter voting things and people intolerably dull and stupid which had hitherto been her life. “Love” had awoke in Isabel Vernon’s heart, and she knew not the tyrant. Such a condition of things could not last very long, however.

The families were thrown much together. Before very long Isabel woke to the consciousness, half delicious but half terrifying, that she had a heart, and—had given it away! that friendship and love were not the same;

that she *loved*—loved Duncan Blake, with a strength that was new to her, and that frightened her, for, she acknowledged, blushing all alone, she loved him without his having sought her love !

It was true, poor guileless Duncan had not sought to excite any interest in Miss Vernon's feelings ; looking upon her as the betrothed of Erne, he had been rarely off his guard ; he prided himself on his coldness and reserve ; he praised himself for the occasions on which he avoided her, and he was unconscious of his nervousness and strangely varying manner towards her, and her alone ; but by degrees the greater experience of the woman used to society, her feminine tact quickened by love, began to read through this simple soldier, as far, at all events, as knowing what would cloud or bring brightness to his expression, though she could not at once penetrate to the springs of his feel-

ing. She set herself to understand him ; “ he was worth knowing, and—helping,” she would say to herself ; for she sometimes thought it was a want of confidence and knowledge of the ways of society that hampered her hero, though her observation at other times forced her to acknowledge that this was not so. She discovered that certain subjects of conversation would always have the effect of chilling his manner and make him retire within himself—for instance, when she would question him about Major Erne : to tell her of his health, his wound, his popularity in the regiment—so when she would innocently relate small anecdotes of what had happened when Major Erne was here—of the pleasant days at Standish at the time of the *fête* and departure of the 27th, in all of which he was mentioned frequently. She noted this effect, and, without knowing the reason, she avoided it in the future, so

that by degrees it came to be that neither Erne's name nor any subject that would bring a shadow on Duncan's face was mentioned between them. Miss Vernon unconsciously adopted the *kind* manner, that women of the world sometimes use towards men they care to please and to put at their ease, and whom they feel to be wanting in that same particular kind of knowledge and experience. A most dangerous position for both, at all times; and fatal, where, as in this case, love already lurked in the back ground.

As the families became more intimate, and Duncan more incautious and unreserved, Isabel would innocently and joyously yield to the happiness of the hour, and not attempt to conceal altogether her preference for Duncan's society; and on these occasions Sibyl's friendship for her agreeable companion, whom all the time she believed to be

attached to Major Erne, would receive a sudden check; she would be jealous of the supposed rights of the very man who was the cause of her own jealousy and suffering, and in his behalf deem poor Isabel a flirt, or at best inconstant; though I am not sure but that in her righteous anger there was not a secret and unacknowledged gleam of joy and hope; and that this did not help her very considerably to pass unscathed through the perils of admiration and violent love made to her on all sides during this season.

Lady Standish was very careful of her young friend. She never appeared in public unless under her chaperonage, or occasionally that of Mrs. Vernon, but Helen Standish seemed to find pride and pleasure in the self-imposed office of the *rôle* of chaperone, and went out and entertained a great deal more this season than she usually cared to do; and thus launched the brother and sister into the

best society, where they quickly made many friends and were much sought after.

It was a pleasant sight, that of the coterie of friends together in the crowd of fashionable assemblies. Types each one of their several and different styles of physical and intellectual beauty, looking totally unlike the overdressed and would-be striking women of the day.

This was very evident on one particular night towards the end of the season, where women generally to a certain extent lose their individuality, dressmakers aiming, it would seem, to make all look more or less alike in a ball-room.

Lady Standish (I don't know how she was dressed, excepting that she had diamonds gleaming everywhere, and a quantity of black lace put about her head in her own particular way, and partly shrouding her magnificent shoulders)—well, Lady Standish

was watching Lord Mount Ida and Sibyl in deep conversation, standing near her. The old earl had on a former occasion been greatly struck with admiration for the new beauty, and requested an introduction by saying: "I should much like to see that face speak—it recalls one I knew in my young days; pray present me to your young friend, Lady Standish;" and he was accordingly presented and was fascinated, as he afterwards told Lady Standish—and was a little curious in his enquiries as to who she was. "Miss Blake, did you say? I do not remember to have met the name before——?" "I am not surprised at your admiration, my lord," replied Lady Standish. "Sibyl Blake wins all hearts, and if you some day can persuade her to sing to you, with your love for good music, I foresee that yours will be lost for ever. No, you cannot have met her family, I should think. She is an orphan. She and her

brother live together, and have a house in E. Place close to us. They are great friends of mine." Lady Standish had her own reasons for not telling more of Sibyl's history then, and as she said, "they are friends of mine," there was something in her tone that no well-bred man would have misunderstood, and the subject was dropped; but after this the acquaintance between the old nobleman and the young girl had ripened. Sibyl had sung to him more than once, and he had, as Lady Standish had foretold, been completely subjugated, to her secret amusement and delight. They seemed also to enjoy one another's society mutually. On the evening in question they were standing together, looking, as usual, thoroughly contented with their position. The earl was a fine aristocratic old man, with straight aquiline features and a keen eye, and was showing to unusual advantage, his courteous

manner being exerted to the utmost, and his face lighted up with an animation rare at his advanced age.

Sibyl looked worthy of his interest. Her dress of rich white was unrelieved by any colour, but fitted to perfection her fine figure, which was not concealed, but only rendered more shadowy by the haze of cloudy gauze that seemed to surround her.

Her head, unlike all others in the room, had had not been subjected to the fashion of the day, nor its classic form been destroyed by elaborate and tasteless arrangement, but the richly tinted dark brown hair was simply coiled round it like a crown, in the front of which glittered a magnificent diamond star, her only ornament.

The girl's exquisite complexion and rich colouring, needed no aid of carefully chosen hues to show it off, and the perfect outline of the head reminded one of the exquisite

Neapolitan torso of Psyche; only Sibyl's mouth was larger, and more full of feeling than any sculptor would have designed it; and this was a statue with the magic of life, and warmth and colour, all now gaining additional brilliancy from the consciousness of having attracted the very man whom her dreams had once pictured as too terrible to be encountered. It was Gerald's father, whom she could not fail to know that she had vanquished—Gerald's father, to whom *he* had not dared to name her. While natural pride and self-respect added somewhat to the dignity of her usual manner, the desire to please, and a secret conscious success, brought a warmth to her cheek, and a sparkle to her eye, that made her look a very Sibyl indeed.

While this curiously assorted pair stood together, enjoying the moment each from a different point of view, Miss Vernon and

Mr. Paget, her partner at the time, stopped to talk to Lady Standish, Isabel's slight, graceful figure, and pretty golden head, forming a charming contrast to the more imperial beauty near her. Her clear brown eyes were evidently seeking something, and presently withdrew themselves suddenly from the doorway close by, against which Captain Blake, looking ill and weary, was leaning, a quiet spectator of the lively scene—the handsomest man in the room, as more than one fair critic decided that night.

When Lady Standish left the ball—which she always did early—Lord Mount Ida took her down to the carriage, and once more made some feeling questions regarding the family of Blake, with the usual success. “It is a very curious thing,” he said, “but Miss Blake reminds me strongly of one I knew many years ago—yes—many years—many years ago. Charming she was too—

once I thought she might have—ah, well—all was for the best, no doubt—but this Sibyl of yours is far handsomer than—the other one—”

By this time they were in the cloak room, where at last they were joined by their party.

Paget had given his arm to Sibyl, and as they passed from the ball-room, and down the crowded staircase, envious glances followed them, and, “Going so soon, Miss Blake?” “This is our dance, Miss Blake.” “Miss Blake, you are engaged for the next square dance,” etc., etc., met them at every step; it was a difficult progress.

Duncan and Isabel followed. I doubt whether they heard anything that was addressed to *them*; and yet I do not think they spoke to one another. As they passed through the crowd I almost thought the little white gloved hand was pressed very

close to his side. I fancy the progress down the staircase seemed very short to them, and too soon over. Presently all were gathered in the cloak-room, and "Lady Standish's carriage," "Lady Standish's carriage stops the way," "Miss Blake's carriage," was being shouted out. The companions of the evening separated. Captain Blake hurried forward with Miss Vernon to put her in the first carriage. For one moment the little hand was in his, and he returned to his sister. Lady Standish whispered to Sibyl as she passed, "Take care of your brother, Sibyl, he looks ill to-night."

When Duncan came back to her, she looked up at him, and was struck with the pallor of his face. Putting her arm within his, they passed out, the door of the brougham was banged to, another carriage was being shouted out, the band was playing a waltz, and, above all the confusion of

voices and noises the clear notes of the horn rang out the pathetic air of “ Kathleen Mavourneen,” “ Oh ! why art thou silent, thou voice of my heart,” etc., etc.





CHAPTER XXVI.

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

So runs the round of life from hour to hour.

TENNYSON.

THE season was advanced, and all its little dramas working themselves out in the usual course; but as our interest is not with the multitude of pleasure-seekers generally, we will confine ourselves to the affairs of the few who form the principal characters of this story.

Isabel Vernon had long since acknowledged to herself the true state of her feelings towards Duncan Blake. She had watched and studied his character closely, and had become convinced, not only that

her attachment was returned, but that for some hidden reason, which she felt equally sure was a pure and unselfish one, he dared not confess his love to her—possibly from some mistaken or supposed necessity, or it might be from want of confidence in himself, or doubt of her feelings, but from the time that she believed (and believed truly!) that she had discovered his secret, the girl's nature seemed changed.

I am inclined to think that Duncan could scarcely be *perfectly* blind to the interest he had excited in Miss Vernon's feelings, and that his conscience and strength of purpose suffered acutely at this time. However that might have been, it is certain that others perceived the change in her. The men discovered that they did not interest her, and gradually fell away from their allegiance and worshipped the rising stars.

“She cares more for a glimpse of the top

of Blake's hat than for one of my best stories," said one drawling dandy, who used to be a faithful follower in Miss Vernon's train, to his friend.

"Well," replied the other, "I must say I admire Blake's sister much more. What a perfect figure that girl has, and by Jove I should pity the fellah that got snubbed by that proud little queen. What a little empress it is! and yet sometimes such a soft expression steals over her. Did you notice her in the gardens yesterday, walking with Lord Mount Ida, and looking up into his face as meekly as a child? They came out together to see Lord Clare, who was sitting propped up in the carriage, looking awfully bad; the poor fellow is really dying now, they say. They walked down the line of carriages till they came to the earl's, and she stood and talked to him, beaming with compassion and gentleness. It was wonder-

ful to see how the poor fellow brightened up as she smiled on him. Just for the moment she had exactly the sort of face for a sister of mercy—a face that would make a man think of heaven before she spoke a word. I say, let's go and see if she is driving in the park to-day."

"Happy thought," said his friend.

These were not the only ones who had transferred their adoration to the new beauty. The shrine of the goddess Sibyl was crowded with worshippers. She was as great a favourite as Isabel had ever been; she was more, she was the rage and the fashion of the season. Isabel seemed either unconscious of the desertion of her former subjects, or was perfectly content that it should be so. She had a genuine affection and admiration for Duncan's sister, *and*, she believed secretly that she had her kingdom.

As to Sibyl, she was quite woman enough

to find pleasure in the sensation of being universally admired. She accepted the sweet incense graciously, without seeking it, however. She had a secret talisman to keep her safe; but how long might that last? She had been trifled with, as she considered, in her tenderest feelings, and it had put her on her guard not to trust too readily the other sex; but she had no protector but her brother, as she sometimes reflected, and, should his health permit him to follow his profession, she must lose even that. She had made this reflection when, more than once, she had met with one whose qualities she could not fail to admire, who seemed to have every requisite to make a woman's happiness, and whose devotion to herself it was not possible to ignore. She had asked herself the question, whether this thing might be? But it had been quickly answered—it was of no use, yet; she

could not give love ; she would not give herself without it. Sibyl was no flirt. She had too much feeling and too little vanity to trifle with such precious articles as hearts. She was not one of those women who ignore that a man is going to propose to her till she has to refuse him ; and as she had no fond, ambitious mother to lure the male sex on to defeat, for the mere sake of conquest, it was not *her* fault if by chance a rash adventurer went away discomfited.

Some of the outside gossips hinted that the attention of the old Earl Mount Ida was very marked. Could he be doting enough to marry again at seventy-five, etc. ? Would she have him ? An earl's coronet was a temptation to any woman ; and *who was* Miss Blake, after all ? “ May and December,” etc. “ Lord Leicester,” etc., etc. “ What would the Honourable Gerald say on his

return?" etc., etc., etc. So they amused themselves.

There was another who at this time seemed in peril—or "was he likely to be the fortunate one?" the ever interested public wondered.

Sibyl liked James Paget, and she took no pains to conceal it. He had been the first friend of the brother and sister when they returned almost friendless to England. He had worked heartily in their service, during which time, and during their long visit to his old friends at Standish, an intimacy had grown up, and the frequent intercourse then commenced had naturally continued in town. Having many mutual acquaintances, they were often in each other's society. It was always pleasant to Sibyl to find him at a party, or indeed to meet him on any occasion.

"He has been so kind to us," she would tell Lady Standish, "and he has always so

much to say, and he knows everybody, and is so clever and amusing." She did not add another great merit in her eyes, namely, that he talked to her frequently of his "friend Erne?"

By this time Lady Standish had, she thought, made discoveries and arrived at conclusions on many points regarding her several young friends. She had satisfied her mind that Gerald's love was fully returned and faithfully guarded; that hitherto Sibyl had been proof against all attacks upon the citadel of her affections. It had been rumoured that there was a prospect of Major Erne's returning very soon; his health had suffered from protracted exertions and privations. His eldest brother, Viscount Clare, was dying, and Gerald was wanted by the old earl to share the family loss, and to take his place by his old father.

All things considered, Lady Standish

watched her friend James Paget with some anxiety. Gerald Erne might be here soon, but not soon enough, perhaps, to spare Paget pain and mortification. She saw that he sought the society of the Blakes more than ever. He liked Duncan extremely, it was true, *but* Sibyl's confidential, though perfectly unconscious, manner to him might mislead him; at all events it must be irresistible, Lady Standish considered. He was a man who under a manner that *seemed* to ignore sentiment, and was full of wit and fun, concealed strong feeling, and might suffer acutely.

On the other hand, IF she should be mistaken concerning Sibyl's feelings! and Paget should be successful! then, what a bitter blow would await Gerald Erne—how faithless he would deem her to his interests! It was too terrible a complication to contemplate. The poor lady was sorely puzzled; but believing

herself to be right in supposing Sibyl to be firmly attached to Gerald, she finally decided on the first opportunity that occurred to give Paget a warning of the state of affairs, without seeking to probe his feelings. She had not long to wait. Finding herself alone with him just after, what so easy as to talk of their friends—a confidential gossiping talk—of the war, of Gerald Erne, of the Blakes, of Duncan and Isabel (they both had perceived and understood the little drama that they were enacting), of the strange and romantic history of the brother and sister, their meeting in the hospital, etc. “And there is more romance in the story than you even know, I dare say,” continued Lady Standish; and then she told him of his friend Gerald Erne’s love—of his passionate confession to her on the night of her *fête*—the night that they all parted—of his confiding Sibyl to her care and friendship—of

her vain search for her—of their dwelling under the same roof in the hospital—of her seeing him brought in, but of his unconsciousness of her being there till she had been actually on board the steamer; that he had written all this to her, Lady S., and continued to send letters asking to know all about Sibyl; that she had answered his letters often, but had refused to do more, thinking it better that he should plead his own cause, when he was able; besides, in such frightful times his very life was so uncertain, and I should have thought it unfair that she should be compromised; but now, he talks of returning—very soon.

When she ceased there was some pause before Paget spoke—at last he said, “This is quite a new idea to me—but—she?—does she—return his affection?”

“I have never asked her, but I have watched her—anxiously for his sake, I con-

fess—when he is spoken of; and of course I *may* be mistaken, but I feel *almost* sure that Gerald Erne does not love Sibyl Blake better than Sibyl loves him.”

There was another short silence: then they talked a little more of other things.

The next day Paget called again, and at an hour when he was likely to find his friend alone. He sat down near her, and after a little general talk, he stood up to go, saying rather abruptly,

“You are quite right; there is no doubt at all that she loves him. I noticed her last night when he was talked of; we were at the Vernons—he is coming home directly; there is no doubt at all.”

He bent down and kissed the hand he held, adding, “Best, and still dearest of friends,” and was gone.

The next time they met he was in his usual good spirits; his manner to Sibyl was

exactly what it always had been, and the world never knew how much or how little James Paget had felt, or if he had ever felt at all.

Yes, Major Erne was coming home; sick leave and "urgent private affairs" were a strictly true plea in his case, and he was coming; but not in time to see the flickering flame of his brother's feeble life go out. Lord Clare was dying. Death refused to be cheated of his victim any longer. The day after that one on which the conversation between Lady Standish and James Paget took place, the blinds were all down in the town mansion of the Earl Mount Ida in Grosvenor Square. Arthur Henry Hugo Montgomery Viscount Clare was dead, and his next brother, the Honourable Gerald Edward Montgomery Erne, succeeded to the title and inheritance.

When once the funeral and all the painful visible accompaniments of death were over

and hidden, this death of the poor invalid would not make much difference to the rest of the world. His mother had long gone before him : of his two sisters one had died in childhood, and the other was married and had a large family and sphere of her own. His brothers were but little at home, and though his father made a point of just seeing him for a few minutes every morning before going downstairs, they generally led separate lives, and rarely ever drove out together. He was very little seen by any but his own attendants ; he had been ill so long that every one was used to it, and habit had dulled anxiety concerning him, even in those who felt tenderly and kindly for him.

He could not be much missed. He had been born, and lived, and died. and left no mark upon the world. The delicacy of health which may have preserved him from vice, had also prevented his doing anything

great in life. He was feebly literary—not sufficiently so to benefit mankind, but just enough to while away some weary hours of his long days of weakness.

To human understanding it is difficult to imagine why such a life is created !

We know nothing of God's purposes. It may be that in those long months and years a soul was "struggling for the light," which when attained adds another star to the glory of the great Creator.





CHAPTER XXVII.

“WHAT WILL MRS. GRUNDY SAY?”

She loved me for the dangers I had passed.

“OTHELLO.”

DUNCAN BLAKE dying! That was the terrible report, the well-grounded fear that ran through the circle where he had so lately moved.

Duncan was dangerously ill—completely prostrated by a low fever—which the doctors attributed to many causes: consequent partly on his severe injuries—over exertion—late hours—heated rooms—a chill—some anxiety of mind, etc. Perhaps one or all of these reasons were right. He now

lay in an almost unconscious state, sometimes wandering in his talk, at others breathing heavily and in pain ; the difficulty at his chest evidently increased—inflammation and exhaustion battling for mastery.

Poor Sibyl ! She was sore stricken by this unexpected calamity ; but youth is sanguine ; she called to mind how ill she had seen her brother in the hospital ; he had rallied there, so now when all others despaired, she was not altogether without hope.

She had the support of her good friend ever near. Sir Thomas had gone back to Standish, and his wife would have been glad to join him there, but benevolence and anxiety kept her in town. She was daily with Sibyl, to comfort and to see that *she* was not overtaxed. She had consultations of the most eminent men with old Dr. Martin, whom Sibyl had summoned in her need. She took care that a practised nurse should

share with Sibyl the sad task of watching. No means were left untried; all that skill, and nursing, and money, and prayers could do, *was* done to save this precious life. Alas! would it be spared! it hung tremblingly in the balance.

London was stifling; the heat was almost tropical—windows and doors were open day and night—not a breath stirred through the rooms.

They thought if they could only have moved him into fresh country air, there would be a chance; but the idea could not be entertained; he would certainly sink in the attempt.

During these sad days great sympathy was manifested for the brother and sister. Numerous were the enquiries made at their door. Paget was like a brother in devotion and suggestive help. Mrs. and Miss Vernon themselves called daily, but the usual

enquiry and answer was not enough for Isabel. She would slip out with her maid, and passing by the servant at the door, would run upstairs to the drawing-room, on the chance of seeing Sibyl. It chanced thus that one day the two girls met, and they soon fell into each other's arms, sobbing their hearts out. When they were comforted, Sibyl said, rather shyly, "Oh! Isabel, the poor fellow has talked of you constantly all through his wanderings. The doctor says it is evident that you are in some way connected with an anxiety in his mind. He is quite sensible and quiet now, and I thought that perhaps—if you would not mind—if you would see him, it might do him good—it might comfort him at all events. When he was so ill at Scutari, he began to get better from the time that he found me, and was happier. It is extraordinary what happiness and hope will do for Duncan. I know you

cannot give him *hope*, Isabel ; but I think it would make him happier to see you—if you don't mind."

While Sibyl was speaking, Isabel was rapidly divesting herself of her bonnet and gloves, and at last interrupted her with, "*Mind!* Sibyl! Oh thank you, I want so much to see him; I did not dare to ask—but—may I go to him alone? "

"Ye-es, if you would rather ; nurse shall be in the dressing-room then ; if you want her she will be with you in a moment. I will go and prepare him. You must expect to see him sadly changed."

In a very few minutes Sibyl returned and took Isabel to the sick-room, (which was at the back of the drawing-room, on the same floor,) just opened the door, saw her enter, and the nurse at the same moment retire to an inner room, and went back to the drawing-room, where she laid her weary head

down on the sofa to think about it all, and fell immediately into a sound sleep.

Isabel paused an instant at the door with a feeling of awe. The windows were wide open, but the light was screened ; the curtains of the bed drawn back ; the accessories of a sick-room were all there ; the faint odour of scent and of remedies filled the room. The man she loved lay before her in his weakness ; and at the first glance at him, the chill fear that he was dying smote her with a force she had not realized till then.

Isabel Vernon was a petted child of fortune ; the way had been made smooth and pleasant to her ; no roughness, no sorrow, no ugly sights had ever been allowed to come before her ; she had never been brought face to face with the stern realities of life and death. For an instant she shrunk back with a vague fear ; but the next moment, hearing her name pronounced in a feeble voice, she was by the

side of the bed, had taken the invalid's hand, and was speaking gently and caressingly to him. She was all woman now; she remembered nothing but that he was ill, perhaps dying, that she loved him, and that he had wanted her.

The sick man looked fixedly and sadly at her from his great hollow eyes, and murmured something about her being "very kind to come."

It was too pitiful—it was more than she could bear—he *must* know before he died. Sinking on her knees by the side of the bed, she laid her cheek on his wasted hand and sobbed out:

"Oh Duncan, don't call it kind; don't you know; don't you see—must I tell you—" and looking up at him with swimming, loving eyes, the sick man could not fail to see, *at last*. He feebly held out his arms to her, and with her golden head nestling against his

shoulder in his extreme bodily weakness he wept like a child.

“Hush Duncan!—dear Duncan!—you must not do so; you must get well for my sake.”

“Oh, my love, my love,” he murmured at last, “is it true? I have waited so long—I have hungered, Isabel—I think I am dying of hunger—my love—my love—but,” he said, loosening her, “Erne! what of Erne? Are you not engaged to him?”

“No, no,” she said, lifting her face, “you foolish Duncan, I have never loved anyone but you,” and by the deep crimson of her blushes he knew that it was true.

Very little more passed between them; he was too weak, and they were both too happy to speak. What mattered any explanation now? They were together at last—that was enough—hand clasped in hand—her flushed cheek resting against his wasted one.

In such supreme moments of life there is no room for thought, no room for fear. The prospect of death itself has no power to scare the soul from the ethereal heights of bliss it has attained.

It seemed to them but a few minutes, though it really was nearer an hour, when the nurse knocked at the door and said: "I am sorry to disturb you, Miss, but I think it won't do to stay any longer; the Captain will be too tired. You must have a nice nap after this, sir."

Duncan was evidently very tired, and whispering, "You'll come again soon, dearest?" he let Isabel go, and after watching her to the last as she crossed the room and softly shut the door, he closed his happy eyes, and soon fell into a quiet peaceful sleep.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

* * * Far along,
From peak to peak, the rattling crags among,
Leaps the live thunder ! not from one lone cloud,
But every mountain now hath found a tongue.

“CHILDE HAROLD.”

WHILE the gay throng in London pursued their amusement with feverish ardour ; while the season drew near its end, and the ranks of pleasure-seekers thinned to seek fresh pleasures in fresher scenes ; while Duncan lay on his sick bed, and Sibyl watched, and Gerald Erne, Viscount Clare, was homeward bound, counting the days and hours anxiously till he should see the white cliffs of Dover looming through the mist of

summer heat ; nothing had been heard of Louis Morley since the day that he escaped from his lodging by the Thames ; but about this time a paragraph appeared in some of the principal papers copied from a local northern one, and was read by Mr. Paget and Sir Thomas and Lady Standish, and discussed by them, though it was not mentioned to those whom it principally concerned till some time afterwards.

Nothing was ever positively known of the way Morley had concealed himself, and passed these latter months of his life ; but it was supposed that he hired himself to the master of the collier “ Aurora,” in which he had got away from the detectives, and had worked for him coaling backwards and forwards from Newcastle to different ports on the eastern coast.

The paragraph was as follows :—

“ During the awful thunder storms that

have prevailed on this coast of late, many vessels have been wrecked. On Friday last a tragic scene occurred at a village on the coast near Lythe. A lone woman who has lived there for many years in an apparently gloomy and depressed state of mind, rejecting all overtures of acquaintance from her neighbours, made a practice of wandering up and down the sea shore in all weathers, seeming as if she waited for something that never came; and prolonged her monotonous watch longer in foul weather than in fine. On Friday last, while the storm was at its height, she was on her dreary parade as usual. A small vessel, that turned out to be a collier bound for Newcastle, was struggling in the offing; for hours she strove to make head against the hurricane, which was blowing straight on shore. Two or three men were seen trying with difficulty to manage the rigging. At last a tremendous gust carried

away every thread of canvass, mast, and bow. A man was blown away clinging to the rigging like a fly. This unfortunate vessel heeled over and dipped under water, but righting herself, came up a mere hulk, and bare ; unless the men were below, they must have been swept off by the furious tempest. Another fearful gust, and the mutilated boat was driven straight for shore, on to a sunken rock ; in a few seconds she broke to pieces like a toy ; nothing was to be seen but some floating spars and planks—no living thing could be descried—no human being could live in such a sea—and no boat could possibly put out to try and give assistance.

“ Through all this wild day the lone grey woman never left the beach. There seemed some horrible fascination for her in the wild dreary scene—the loud roar of the dashing waves, that every now and then tossed up on shore pieces of wood, tin cans, a man’s boot,

and the rough fittings of a collier's cabin. One painted board came up close to her with the strange word "Aurora" in large letters on it. She did not know what it meant, and scarcely heeded it.

"The sun became low in the heavens and completely obscured by heavy drifting masses of clouds. The premature darkness of a thundery sky on a close afternoon hung heavily and still threateningly over the coast; but still the woman paced backwards and forwards, her grey cloak blown sometimes by fierce sudden gusts tight round her lean and sinewy figure, sometimes flying far behind her in the wind, leaving her exposed to the pitiless fury of the elements. She seemed not to notice such trifles, but struggled on backwards and forwards. Suddenly something was thrown upon the beach, close at her feet: a shapeless mass—a human body; she shivered and stopped; she stooped down

to look at—a drowned man. The darkness deepened rapidly; the rain pelted down pitilessly and blindingly; she heeded not; with womanly touch she carefully drew off the tangle of seaweed that twisted round the body; she gently lifted the head so as to look closely in the dead man's face, and, gave a wild piercing shriek. In the pale altered lineaments, in the tossed and battered face, by the dim light, she had recognized her son. The only living being she had cared for. The last link of human love that had kept her poor weakened mind within the limits of sanity. Selfish, neglectful, dissipated, unprincipled, *but*, still her son, her dear son, Louis Morley. She was found by the coast-guard some hours afterwards sitting by the body, and perfectly insane. The woman whose stern gloomy silence had been proverbial among her neighbours, was found at sunrise gaunt, wild, and drenched with the

rain and spray, but nursing the head of her dead son on her lap, chattering and cooing tenderly and caressingly to it as if he were a baby on her knee.

“Besides the recognition of the miserable woman, there were marks upon the clothes, and evidence from a pocket-book found on the body, which gave proof of the drowned man being no other than the son, Louis Morley, who occasionally, at long intervals, was known to visit his only relative.

“He was buried by the parish authorities, and, no friends appearing to interfere, the poor woman was conveyed to the pauper asylum for lunatics, where in all probability she will wear out her unhappy life.”

Thus ended the career of one who had wrought great evil in his day.

Whether in those last months of physical labour, possible privation, and mental guilty fear, any compunction, or remorse, or divine

repentance visited his soul no human being ever would know.

After James Paget had read the paragraph detailing the awful end of this man's terrible history, and had spoken of it with Sir Thomas Standish, he put the newspaper carefully away, and quietly set the police to work to verify the story, so as to put the matter beyond a doubt for ever. This was very easily done, and then the subject was buried, only once to be related to those whom it most nearly concerned.

To Sibyl, need it be said that it was felt to be an intense relief. The fact of the proceedings against her former acquaintance Morley had weighed heavily on her mind and spirits. It was a "necessity," they had represented to her, though a painful one—one that had grieved and shocked them all sorely.

They were now very thankful for the retri-

butive justice of God, which had taken the issue of events so dreadful out of all human power; and had also spared them the pain of the publicity which would have been given to their private and unhappy family affairs.





CHAPTER XXIX.

URGENT PRIVATE AFFAIRS.

There is even a happiness
That makes the heart afraid.

HOOD.

WHEN the mind is completely absorbed by some crushing anxiety, such as the mortal sickness of our best beloved, we neither know nor care how it fares with the world beyond our walls; but did we pause to consider it would seem strange to us, that the crowded, busy, pleasure-seeking city should continue its course just the same, not heeding our sorrow, scarcely missing us from its throng, and, with but few exceptions, not pausing in its business, or in its

revels. The same bargains are struck, the dance and the song lose nothing of their merriment, though a heart is breaking.

It must ever be thus. The world cannot stand still, and so ever varying are its changes, that though to-day the garland may be mine, and the yew in the hand of my neighbour, to-morrow our lots may be reversed, and mine may be the house of mourning. And it is well, I think, that the selfishness of sorrow suffices unto us, and that these reflections do not come to us, till the tide of our grief is passed.

Sibyl knew nothing of what was going on in the outside world, and yet there were events enacting there that would have interested her even now, I am inclined to think.

Gerald Erne, Viscount Clare, Major of her Majesty's 27th Hussars, had returned from the seat of war. He found his father at home alone, his young brother Reginald

having returned to college after the funeral. The old earl was somewhat subdued and softened by his recent family loss, and yet proud to be able to recognise in his fine soldier-like and favourite son Gerald the future representative of the old family honours. He himself had served under Wellington, and was a General of the old stern martinet school towards men, while with women he was courteous and gallant.

Gerald found his father far more genial and communicative than he had ever known him before. The proud old man unfolded many family affairs and confidences to his son, as he sat up late with him on the first night of his return. He enquired, too, anxiously about the state of his health. "Kortall will soon set you up, depend upon it; but consult him at once, my dear boy; don't lose any time. We must not have *you* an invalid." Then at last, having exhausted

all other topics, he said rather abruptly, "I'll tell you what you must do now, Gerald: you must marry—you must marry at once. I know the woman I should like to see you choose. She is one in ten thousand—she is fit to be a princess. By George, sir, if I were a few years younger I would try for her myself, and I believe I should have a good chance."

The son did not at all like this determined attack upon his freedom, but he laughed, and asked a few bantering questions, adding, "But you have not yet told me the name of this paragon, my lord."

"Blake," answered the earl, "Miss Blake. Sibyl, your friend Lady Standish calls her. She is her great friend. I noticed the name particularly; it is uncommon, and it suits her. I am sure there is a history attaching to her. I have not discovered it, but I do not know anything of

the name of Blake. It is strange, but however, somehow or other, she is well connected; you cannot doubt it. She and her brother live together. They have no parents living, I know, nor have I ever heard of any relatives. Their fortunes are supposed to be considerable, but there is no flash about them. They are of the right sort. They ring true, Gerald—they ring true. By the bye, I only heard the other day that Blake is one of the 27th. He came home after Balaclava desperately bad, and has never thoroughly got over it. You must know something of *him* at all events. He has been going about all the season, but it has been too much for him, I fancy. He is very ill, poor fellow: not out of danger when I last heard. They have both been made a great deal of this year in town.”

This was a startling speech for Gerald; he was thankful for the length of it, which

gave him a little time before replying. Here was the great difficulty which in his moral cowardice he had held in such fear—which had caused so much sorrow—almost cleared away. Ah! but would the old lord have been so clear-sighted to Sibyl's attractions as the child of Oliver Blake of Thames Terrace? He had not time to think; he was taken by surprise. Lady Standish had told him nothing of all this; her reports had been very meagre. He recollected that he had learnt nothing from her letters but the facts of Sibyl being well, settled down with her brother, and a general favourite. His friend had been *very* prudent, but she had meant it well for both—she had been wise. Gerald quickly determined to see her before betraying himself to his father. He only answered:

“Blake ill again! I am very sorry. He is a very good fellow, and saved my life

without a shadow of doubt. I should have been left in the Long Valley if it had not been for Blake. He might have got off much better if he had thought of himself; as it was, it nearly finished him, poor fellow. I *am* sorry he is bad again. O Blake's a capital fellow. I will look him up."

The next morning Gerald hurried off to Lady Standish. She had been early to the Blakes on account of the heat, and was not going out again till she would see Sibyl in the evening. She started as "Lord Clare" was announced, but came forward eagerly when she recognised her old friend, stretching out both her hands. Much was quickly asked, and told—ending with, "Yes, I think you might go at once to Sibyl;" and he was soon standing with beating heart on the threshold of his beloved.

"Miss Blake at home?"

"Yes sir, but——"

Before the servant had time to explain his "but" Gerald had pushed past him and marched straight up to the drawing-room, without waiting to be announced. It was no doubt very strange and unusual behaviour, but the reader must remember how often his happiness had eluded him as a will-o'-the-wisp; he had long ago repented his caution in love; his impatience could no longer be controlled, and he felt that he *would* not be denied seeing her.

It was the morning that Isabel had been admitted to the sick room. She was yet with the invalid, and all was still. Sibyl, worn out with anxiety and watching, was fast asleep on the sofa where we left her. Gerald knocked gently, but receiving no answer, opened the door cautiously and went in. Either the slight noise, or an instinct of a presence near her, woke Sibyl. She started up, and found herself clasped in the strong

arms of Gerald, who, between the kisses that he showered on her hair, her eyes, her lips, murmured,

“Sibyl, my darling—at last—at last I have found you—look up, Sibyl—you love me, darling? Say you love me, a little—my darling. I can never let you go till you say so—just once—”

It was all so sudden—it was too much. She *could* not speak; she was besides tired and worn—her nerves were overstrained—and this was too much. She broke down completely under the sudden shock of joy and surprise. She did not struggle to free herself from his embrace, but she trembled, gasping and sobbing hysterically till he became frightened, and gently releasing her and placing her on a chair he stood by her, vainly striving to reassure her, while a pang of jealousy, and a vague fear lest he had come too late, shot through his heart.

“Forgive me, Miss Blake—pray forgive me—I have been too hasty. I was so anxious to see you. Speak one word, I *entreat* you, to say you are not angry.”

Sibyl was deadly pale; she tried to smile, but her mouth quivered ominously. She put out a little hand towards him in sign of forgiveness, and just managed to say,

“But, I don’t understand”—when Isabel entered the room. The man of the world recovered himself first. There was mutual surprise at this meeting, and Sibyl looked on at the friendly greeting of these old acquaintances with wonder and bewilderment; what could it all mean? They evidently were not very much interested in each other. There was constraint and a pre-occupation over them all, so that the conversation which ensued halted, and consisted of mutual disconnected enquiries.

“When did you arrive, Lord Clare?”

“How is Mrs. Vernon?” “I trust that your brother is improving?” “How do you think Lord Mount Ida is looking?” etc., etc., etc.

The nurse, hearing voices, crept in to say that her patient had fallen into a “beautiful sleep,” and she hoped the house would be kept very quiet. He had not slept like this before. There was no knowing, it might be the turning point; it was very important that he should not be disturbed. So Lord Clare rose, saying in a low voice to Sibyl, “I shall come back very soon if I may—this evening, or to-morrow?”

“To-morrow,” Sibyl answered, and he was obliged to be satisfied.

Cruel, inconsistent Sybil; thorough woman. She had pined and yearned for this man’s love when she thought it lost to her, and now that it was ready to be laid at her feet, she said “to-morrow!”

She afterwards assured herself that she wanted time to think ; but she knew it was not so, but only a true woman's instinct.

Isabel had quickly discovered that something had disturbed her friend, but it was not a moment for explanations, or confidences. She made her lie down on the sofa, and covering her up and kissing her said, " There, Sibyl, now have a good long rest, you know you are quite tired out. We shall have *you* ill next if you do not take care of yourself. You know your brother is asleep, and the nurse with him, so promise me to rest. I hope I have not done him any harm ; he has more than hope now, Sibyl—he has certainty"— and before Sibyl could understand or ask a word, she had left her. She told the man downstairs that *no one* was to be admitted, and no sound made, till Miss Blake rang, and then she quietly slipped out of the house.

The next morning broke happily for all these excited hearts. The invalid was better—he had slept for many hours; provided no relapse took place, he was out of danger. The tears stood in kind Dr. Martin's eyes as he held Sibyl's hand, and assured her of this. "But still, my dear, it will be slow; only time and great care—*great*, incessant care, and quiet, will be his chance; I only say that *immediate* danger has passed."

Sibyl, too, had rested, and had recovered her self-possession, so that when "Lord Clare" was announced, she was able to receive him with proper dignity, and my polite readers will be relieved to hear that Gerald also this time behaved more in accordance with the "convenances" of society. There was so much to ask—so much to tell; it seemed as if a lifetime would not suffice: so much the better. Their lives must become one. They were solemnly engaged,

and I do not think that Gerald had any cause to complain of coldness on Sibyl's part this time !

She laughed gently when he told her how his father had spoken of her. " But he does not know my history yet, Gerald ; *a woman with a history !* is such a dreadful thing to a man like him. Tell him that *my mother* was the Kate Meredith he once cared for ; but then, my poor father ! and my being a nurse at Scutari ; perhaps—when he hears it all, he may change his opinion," and Sibyl turned pale at the thought.

" My darling ! do you think it would make any difference to me ? Not all the fathers, nor all the histories that ever existed, can make you anything but the best, and sweetest, and dearest woman that ever lived. You are mine now, Sibyl, my own—my very own ; I will never leave you again."

" Yes, indeed you will, sir," she replied,

while her great yearning lovely eyes flashed and melted with pride and tenderness. "It is very dreadful, dear Gerald, but—I must send you away now—till—to-morrow!"

It is not fair to betray the private confidences of these happy lovers, and I run the risk of my readers supposing that after all my heroine was just like any other woman, in love: so I drop the veil henceforth over all that passed between them.

Isabel followed close on Lord Clare's visit. "How was Captain Blake? Might she see him to-day?"

"Oh yes, he is decidedly better; care and quiet still important; but you prescribed so well for him yesterday, you seem to understand his case so thoroughly, that you are invited to pay him a short visit, and to lunch with me every day, when it does not encroach too much on your more agreeable engagements," answered the happy, mischievous Sibyl.

The two girls had much to tell each other, many events to explain, and to relate, and to wonder over, and some confessions on Sibyl's part regarding her unfounded suspicions of Isabel's flirting tendency. "But after that scene in the long walk at Standish you will allow that it was difficult for me to guess at the truth," said Sibyl.

"Perhaps so, but remember, you did not wait to see the end," replied Isabel archly.

From this conversation dated a fast and life-long friendship.





CHAPTER XXX.

“A L A B O N H E U R.”

For everything created
In the bounds of earth and sky,
Hath such longing to be mated,
It must couple or must die.
The wind of heaven beguiles the leaf ;
The rose invites the bee ;
The sickle hugs the barley sheaf,
And I love thee.
By night and day, in joy and grief,
Do thou love me ?

DUNCAN lived. Happiness seemed to have renewed the thread of life ; but at present only as an invalid.

As soon as it was possible to move him with safety he and his sister went to the south coast of England, where the sea breezes did much to strengthen him and restore his

general health ; but a great and serious delicacy of the chest remained.

Later in the autumn the whole party found themselves once more assembled under the hospitable roof of Standish. Mrs. and Miss Vernon, Lord Mount Ida, Lord Clare, Captain and Miss Blake, Mrs. and Miss Domville, Col. Swift (Sebastopol having fallen), who had lately brought the remnants of his regiment back to England, and Mr. Paget ; but the latter declared to Lady Standish that he “really would not stand this sort of thing long ; it was like living in a nest of turtle doves ; it was catching, he was sure, worse than measles. There was Swift sickening for the complaint, he could see as plainly as possible.”

This dangerous state of things was not destined to last long. Gerald saw no reason why he should postpone the fulfilment of his happiness, and Sibyl could plead no excuse for delay, excepting her brother's health.

There was some difficulty with regard to Duncan's future. Mrs. Vernon's enthusiasm about him had cooled down; he had disappointed her in his guarded and variable manner towards Isabel, who had a right to expect complete submission in his case, for she could not conceal from herself, great as was her astonishment, that her daughter had given opportunities and encouragement to this cautious admirer, such as she had never accorded to any other. Then when Gerald had returned as Lord Clare, and was "so suddenly accepted" by Sibyl, as she chose to consider was the case, this poor lady felt as if she had been unjustly used, and almost robbed of rank and station for her child—added to which her laudable maternal prudence did not like her daughter to marry a man in so delicate, if not dangerous, a state of health as Duncan; but Isabel pleaded, "Why, mamma, that is the very reason why

I should marry him ; surely I can take better care of him than anyone else; for of course Sibyl's marriage cannot be indefinitely delayed. Duncan is ordered to go abroad for the winter, and it seems to me only a matter of course that I am the proper person to go with him."

Mrs. Vernon did not take it as a matter of course at all. Then, as on many former occasions of her life where her child's welfare was concerned, her common sense woke up and asserted itself; but Isabel was not so easy to manage as formerly. Ever since she had known Duncan she had shown a decision and self-dependence of character which had taken her mother by surprise, and had imperceptibly taken the management of events out of her hands.

On this occasion it had been at last decided that a consultation of doctors should be held on Duncan's health, and the opinions

of the M.D.'s would influence Mrs. Vernon's decision, she declared. The result was what Isabel considered "perfectly satisfactory and conclusive." Poor Mrs. Vernon did not consider it so at all, but she had to yield to the pressure of circumstances.

Doctors A. and B. agreed in the opinion "that Captain Blake must give up the army; that he must certainly not pass the winter in England, or they would not answer for the consequences; but that a couple of years spent on the Riviera, moving about according to the season, would in all probability do wonders for him—with *great care* always understood; the hours and habits of an invalid must be strictly adhered to, to ensure a happy result. It would no doubt be immensely in his favour to have a devoted wife to watch over him, and to cheer him. The mind had an extraordinary effect upon the body in his case; *but* the young lady should

understand thoroughly what she was undertaking. There was every probability of Captain Blake's ultimate restoration to tolerable health and strength with such advantages, but it was an anxious case, etc., etc—"

Miss Vernon assured the physicians that she perfectly comprehended, and had weighed the consequences of the step she was taking, and then excited their admiration by the intelligent and courageous manner in which she begged to have the case with all its possibilities and probabilities thoroughly and unreservedly explained to her, so that she might be the real assistance to her husband that she so earnestly desired to be.

So there was no more to be said against the marriage. It was expedient that Duncan should leave England before the cold weather set in, so there was not much time to lose. Sibyl made it a strong point that

her brother should give her away on her marriage, so it was settled that in the last week of October the wedding of Gerald and Sibyl should be solemnized in London with all befitting pomp and ceremony, and that two days later Duncan and Isabel, having completed their preparations for their foreign tour, should be privately and quietly married with as little excitement and fatigue as possible, and start the same day for Folkestone on their way for the South.

The friends all gathered for the last time at the house of their good friends at Standish, as was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, but a very few days dispersed them to complete their final preparations for coming events.

So it came to pass that distant friends read in the papers that on the 27th October, 1855, the marriage had taken place of Gerald, Viscount Clare, to Sibyl, only

daughter of the late O. Blake, Esq., and on the 29th October, 1855, that of Duncan Blake, Captain in Her Majesty's 27th Hussars, to Isabel, only child of the late General Vernon.

Isabel was at the first wedding, not as a bridesmaid, but looking charming and radiant in her own expectant happiness, and satisfaction in that of her friend.

Hetty, in her fluttering rosy attire, was a blushing and rather frightened little bridesmaid among the other more experienced young ladies who assisted on this august occasion.

As the bride walked up the church on the arm of her brother the likeness between them was striking, and rendered more so than usual by Sibyl's paleness, and Duncan's handsome face being refined and etherealised by illness ; Sibyl, in all the glory of her youth and beauty, was a sight that

was indeed pleasant to the eyes. As the venerable earl watched the approach of the lovely and dignified woman who in a few minutes was to belong to his ancient house, he was content, and glancing at the man standing at the altar steps, who also with anxious but happy eyes watched the coming of her whom now he would vow to love and honour till death divided them, he must have felt as all others did, that they were truly a goodly pair.

It was a cheerful wedding. The orthodox congratulations, and salutations, and health drinkings, were conscientiously performed, and by the time that Lord Mount Ida took his daughter-in-law into his arms to bestow upon her his paternal blessing and farewell Sibyl had fully recovered her usual brilliancy, which the agitation of the morning had paled, and Lord and Lady Clare drove off amidst the orthodox shower of

satin slippers and good wishes ; so if they were not happy ever afterwards their friends, at all events, had the satisfaction of feeling that they were not to blame.

Sir Thomas and Lady Standish good-naturedly remained in town till the 29th, *he* to act as father to Isabel at her particular request, and Lady Standish to comfort Mrs. Vernon and to take her back to Windsor for a few days before she went to pay a long visit of months to some old relations in the north.

James Paget “looked in just to see that all was properly done,” he said, but there were no other witnesses of the ceremony. Isabel went to church in her pretty quiet travelling dress, and half an hour afterwards Captain and Mrs. Blake, with a useful maid, and an experienced travelling servant, were on their way to seek health and happiness on the blue shores of the Mediterranean.

Poor Mrs. Vernon! It was a cruel day for her. Not only had she lost her child, the one object of her pride and ambition and love, but she had lost her without gaining for her the brilliant worldly position she had so earnestly coveted. She had given her "to be a nurse to an invalid," as she ruefully repeated to herself. "Isabel, of all people, to be a nurse!" She had not even the satisfaction to look back on, so dear to a woman's heart, of a gay wedding worthy of the transfer of such a treasure, and I fear it added to the grievance that she had so lately seen the display she loved made on behalf of another. Perhaps, also, what added to the bitterness of her grief, was a pang of jealousy that it was all Isabel's own doing. She had so ordered everything to spare her Duncan as much fatigue as possible, and was perfectly contented and happy!

"What *does* it matter the next day, dearest

mother, *how* we have been married, provided it cannot be undone,” said Isabel cheerfully on the eve of the 29th of October, as mother and daughter were having their last talk alone. “I really could not have gone through another tremendous ceremony like Sibyl’s so soon again; and then only think, *mamma mia*” (she added mischievously), “my bridal dress would have had to be put away for nobody knows how long, for of course *I* shall not want such finery while I am a bride; it would have been a great pity, and have half broken Smart’s heart; and what expense and trouble I have spared you with regard to a breakfast, and all the usual fuss!”

The last argument Mrs. Vernon repudiated; when had she begrudged trouble or expense for her child! but the wedding dress was another thing—that was a consoling reflection likely to have effect; but only time

could soften Mrs. Vernon's regrets and anxieties ; and I hope that my readers will not withhold from such a sorely tried lady the sympathy to which she considers she is entitled.





CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

All's well that ends well.

IT only remains that I should add a few words for the benefit of those readers who may be sufficiently interested in my favourites to care to know what changes two years brought to them after the important events of the last chapter.

Another marriage had taken place.

When Colonel Swift talked to Hetty Domville gently and tenderly of her dead brother Harry; when he showed her the little bow of ribbon and the faded flowers, that for love of her bright eyes he had worn in his breast

through all the campaign ; when she opened her round childish eyes with wonder, and understood by the man's white anxious face that he was *in earnest*, that her foolish prettinesses had sunk into a true faithful heart ; when Hetty realised these flattering and astounding facts, she was very much touched, and finally consented to unite herself for life to this lively but soft-hearted veteran. And as it is proverbial that women command their lords, and as Colonel Swift still commands his regiment, Hetty may be said to be Commander-in-Chief of the Royal 27th Hussars. Although there are few of the old set left who went out together to the Crimean War, it is still a picked regiment, and Phill Crofts continues the butt of the young Cornets.

James Paget is getting higher every year at the bar. He is still the cleverest, the most witty, and the most genial in every

society; still *talking* worldly wisdom, and *doing* all that is kind and unselfish at any cost; ever the welcome guest at the houses of his friends; and still a bachelor!

Lord and Lady Clare have settled down to the fulfilment of the by no means unimportant duties, as well as pleasures, of an English nobleman's life. They are looked up to as models of hospitality, of extended benevolence, of intellectual encouragement, and of domestic happiness. There is already a little future earl, to be brought up in the way he should go; and as Lord Mount Ida is fading rapidly, Gerald will soon be called upon to take his father's place, and his seat in the Upper House.

Captain and Mrs Blake have been in England for the summer months, after spending two winters on the continent without coming home. Climate and care have done such wonders for Duncan that he is a compara-

tively strong man again ; “ but we want to know something of Spain,” said Mrs. Blake, “ so we are going this winter to see the pictures at Madrid ; buy oranges and lace mantillas at Seville ; take care of ourselves at Malaga to confirm the health we have gained thank God (it was always *we* with Mrs. Blake), and then come home and settle down quietly like respectable people. Duncan is going to do wonderful things for his country in the way of training Volunteer and Militia forces, and when he has practised his theories a little, perhaps he will go into Parliament to bring them forward.”

They had no children at present, and were therefore able to devote themselves entirely to one another.

Mrs. Vernon had become reconciled to Isabel's fate, as indeed she could not have failed to be, when she witnessed her daughter's beaming happiness and pride in

her handsome and devoted husband ; but she naturally looked forward to the time when she should see Isabel established in the comfortable English home which Duncan's ample and accumulating fortune would ensure.

Standish Park, where so many happy faces had often gathered, had seen some sad ones of late. A season of mourning veiled the old house and its mistress from the outer world. Silence reigned where sounds of merriment and hospitality had so often mingled, for the lady of the domain was alone. Sir Thomas had been gathered to his forefathers. Helen Standish was a widow.

The lines in the clear bright face were perhaps somewhat deepened ; here and there a single thread of silver might be discovered in the glossy hair ; but the heavy folds of black fell round a form as grand and fault-

less as ever; and in the discipline of time and experience, her manner had gained, what its unconscious dignity and subdued feeling always nearly reached, perfection.

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